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THE CASE FOR MIRACLE

By the Rev.

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"Portentum ergo fit non contra naturam, sed
contra quod est nota natura."

(A miracle, therefore, is not contrary to nature,
but contrary to nature as known to us.)

AUGUSTINE, *De Civ. Dei*, bk. xxi., ch. viii.

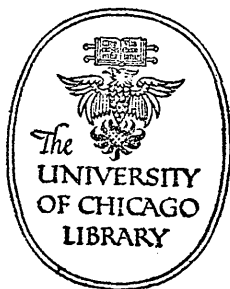
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PREFACE

I HAVE given the following lectures on Miracles some eight times in Hyde Park, eleven times to students at King's College, and on other occasions elsewhere. I have here written them out from the actual notes I used then, adding more detail for readers but not altering the outline. For in writing you can say more. Readers can stop to think. They can read a sentence again for themselves and do not want repetition in the text. Nor do men want, either in hearing or reading, to be bothered with references or to be distracted with too many quotations.

But in open-air speaking you can be challenged and heckled as to your authority for what you say. I have added, therefore, in the notes at the foot of the page, references to justify what I say in the text, quotations to show what people say whose opinion is better worth having than mine, and, in most cases, though not in all, to suggest good books to read.

I have tried to say nothing in the text that the ordinary educated man cannot understand, while in the notes I suggest matter rather for scholars and specialists. The four chapters, therefore, can

be had separately in the S.P.C.K.'s series of *Little Books on Religion*, and used for discussion in classes or put on sale in racks for tracts in churches, while I hope students and preachers may care to have the indexed book on their shelves.

For the lesson I have learned by lecturing on Christian Evidence in the open air is that the mass of men have very little idea of what Christianity is, and that we have largely failed to "get our message over" and make our creed understood.

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CHAPTER I

ARE MIRACLES POSSIBLE?

"They say, miracles are past; and we have our philosophical persons, to make modern and familiar, things supernatural and causeless." — LAFEU, in Shakespeare's *All's Well that Ends Well*, Act II., Sc. iii.

"It is, I think, commonly supposed, that there is some peculiar presumption, from the analogy of Nature, against the Christian scheme of things; at least against miracles." — Bp. BUTLER, *Analogy*, pt. ii., ch. ii., § 2.

ARE miracles possible? Can they happen? This is a question that lies behind a number of other questions. It must be settled before we can answer the others.

For instance, it must be settled before we examine the evidence for any particular miracle. If they are impossible it is of no use examining the evidence for the resurrection of our Lord. If they cannot happen it is waste of time to look for proofs of His miraculous birth. For no evidence is sufficient to prove a thing that is impossible. No proofs can make us believe that a thing happened which could not have happened. But to start with such assumptions is what is called "begging the question." No argument can influence a man who has already made up his mind.

Again, the question lies behind a vast amount of criticism of the New Testament. If a man starts with the assumption that miracles are impossible he has got to explain away all the stories of miraculous events in it. If he holds

that miracles cannot happen he is bound to say that the documents which say they did are untrustworthy, that the witnesses were deceived, or that the accounts are later inventions. He has made up his mind already and cannot judge fairly.

Again, it is an assumption about a question that lies behind all matters of religion. It marks the division between naturalism and supernaturalism, between the people who say that the physical order of Nature is all, and those who say that there is a spiritual order as well above the natural order. It is the test to distinguish between theories of immanence and transcendence—that is, between those that say that the spiritual, if it exists, is confined to the material universe, as against those which believe in a transcendent God, the Creator and Ruler of Heaven and Earth.¹

So the question of miracles presents one of the chief points of attack on Christianity. It is especially widespread today owing to various causes in the past. Therefore it must be our first consideration. We must see how it has come to be so prominent. We must see what we mean by “the reign of law.” We must examine the grounds on which we decide whether the evidence for an event must be accepted or rejected.

I

First of all, then, for the history of the controversy. It was not very prominent in the Early Church. People had very little idea of the uniformity of the world, and practically everybody believed in miracles. It is true there were sceptics

¹ See “Dualism” in my *Modes of Faith*, ch. iv., p. 107, and in the S.P.C.K. *Little Books on Religion*, No. 85.

who did not. The Sadducees among the Jews said there was "no resurrection, neither angel, nor spirit."² There were individuals who doubted in particular cases. But the mass of men—Jews, Pagans, and Christians—believed that they did, or, at any rate, that they *might* happen any time.

So, little stress was laid on them by Christ. His miracles were chiefly acts of compassion, or signs of His nature and revelations of His power to the disciples who already believed on Him. "An evil and adulterous generation seeketh after a sign," He declared, and said that the only sign to be given to them was the sign of the prophet Jonah—the inner sign in men's hearts of conscience calling them to repentance.³ He found His miracles an active hindrance to His teaching when the people followed Him for more loaves and fishes. At best He put them in a second place, "Or else believe me for the very works'

² Acts xxiii. 8.

³ The reference to the whale in Matt. xii. 39 seems to be a comment of the Evangelist's and not our Lord's words. Cp. Luke xi. 29. Cp. A. Plummer, *An Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel according to St. Matthew* (Elliot Stock, 1909), p. 183. "There is no doubt that v. 40 is part of the original text of this Gospel; it is absent from no MS. or version. But there is good reason to believe it is no part of Christ's reply on this occasion. . . . The verse may be a gloss which has got into the authority which St. Matthew used; or it may be an insertion made by himself on the supposition that Christ's mention of Jonah referred to him as a type of the Resurrection. The latter is more probable. P. 184: "The argument runs smoothly when the preaching of Jonah is compared with the preaching of Christ and the penitence of the Ninevites is contrasted with the impenitence of the unbelieving Jews."

sake."⁴ As a reason for belief they are definitely inferior to His personal claim.

So again, however we interpret the story of the Temptation in the Wilderness, whether as an actual meeting with a personal Satan (an interpretation which involves us in serious difficulties) or as a parable describing the inner conflict of Christ in His own Human Nature, does not matter. In either case the story must have come from our Lord Himself, and the point of it is that, conscious of His superhuman power, He had, as man, to resist the temptation to use it to convince people.⁵ It was not by bribes of food, not by startling them with wonders, not by miraculously over-ruling their wills that they could be won, but by persuasion, by example, by Grace.

So it was in the history of the Church. Christianity was attacked by the heathen writer Celsus, in a book written about the year 178. We know the line he took from the reply written by Origen, the great Christian scholar and teacher of Alexandria. He attacked the miracles of the New Testament. Any juggler can work them, he said. Origen replied by contrasting the life and character of our Lord with those of the Pagan

⁴ John xiv. 11. Cp. x. 38, "Though ye believe not me, believe the works."

⁵ Cp. H. Latham, *Pastor Pastorum* (Cambridge, 1890), p. 123: "That Satan should have appeared in bodily form is, to my mind, opposed to the spirituality of all our Lord's teaching. Such an appearance presents endless difficulties, not only physical but moral. If our Lord knew the tempter to be Satan, He was, as I have said, forearmed; if He did not know him, this introduces other difficulties. He must at any rate have been surprised at meeting a specious sophist in the wilderness."

miracle-mongers. It was because of what He was that he believed in Him as the Son of God.⁶

Later on Augustine (A.D. 354-430) refers to several as having been wrought in his time. One, indeed, the finding of the bodies of the martyrs Gervasius and Protasius at Milan, and the cures wrought by them, had played a large part in the struggle with the Arian Empress Justina, who wanted to seize the churches of Milan for her sect, but it was the moral miracle of his own conversion that loomed largest in his eyes.⁷ Accepting the others as a matter of course, he met the objections which existed even in those days, that they were against Nature. God is Himself the Author of Nature, he argued, therefore they cannot be against Nature. "We say," he wrote:

"that all miracles (*portenta*) are contrary to nature; but they are not so. For how can that be contrary to nature which happen by the will of God, since

⁶ *Contra Celsum*, i. 68, Eng. tr. in B. J. Kidd's *Documents Illustrative of the History of the Church*, vol. i., No. 127, p. 180: "Celsus, having a suspicion that the great works performed by Jesus . . . would be brought forward to view, affects to grant that these statements may be true. . . . But he immediately compares them to the feats of jugglers, who profess to do more wonderful things . . . and he asks: 'Since, then, these persons can perform such feats shall we of necessity conclude that they are Sons of God, or must we admit that they are the proceedings of wicked men under the influence of an evil spirit?' Origen's reply was: 'But if the life of Jesus was such (as to show men how they should live) how can anyone fairly compare Him with those jugglers and not rather believe in Him as God manifested in a human body for the welfare of our race.'"

⁷ *De Civ. Dei*, xxii., 8, and *Confessions*, IX. vii. 16.

the will of so mighty a Creator is the nature of each created thing? A miracle, therefore, is not contrary to nature but contrary to nature as it is known to us."⁸

His words have quite a modern ring about them.

So in the Middle Ages, when the mass of people were credulous, and wonderful, even ridiculous, stories of miracles abounded, great minds were critical and discriminating. The idea of uniformity of law was strong in their minds, for they said that Nature was the work of one God. So Aquinas, the great mediæval scholastic philosopher (A.D. 1226-1274), declared that "if this order of nature is considered as depending on its first cause, God cannot do anything contrary to it" but, he added: "He is not subject to the order of secondary causes," and "there is no better way of manifesting the subjection of all nature to the divine will than by miracles." "All nature," he writes:

"may be called the artistic product of divine workmanship. But it is not contrary to the notion of workmanship for the artist to work something to a different effect in his work, even after he has given it its first form. Neither is it, then, contrary to nature if God works something in natural things to a different effect from that which the ordinary course of nature involves."

"Those events are properly to be styled miracles

⁸ *Ibid.* Cp. *Contra Faustum*, xxvi. 3: "God, the Creator and Founder of all natures, does nothing contrary to nature; for that will be natural to each thing which is done by Him from whom every kind and number and order of nature comes." The whole passage is given in my *Question Time in Hyde Park* (S.P.C.K., 1924, p. 99).

which happen by divine power beyond the order commonly observed in nature."⁹

Again it is wonderful how he anticipates modern objections.

But in the eighteenth century the atmosphere was different. The advance of Natural Science was being made use of in the development of machinery. It was becoming a mechanical age, and people were coming to think of the world as a great machine. The prevailing tendency in religion was towards Deism, which regarded God as outside the world. He had made it and set it going, and left it to go. So men talked of the "laws of nature" and readily accepted what Spinoza (A.D. 1632-1677) had written in the century before. "The universal laws of nature are simply the laws of God." Anything contrary to them "would necessarily be contrary to the decree and mind and nature of God." Nature, therefore, "keeps a fixed and changeless order," so it clearly follows:

"that the word miracle can only be understood as referring to opinions of men, and means nothing more than something the natural cause of which we cannot explain by the example of some other ordinary event of which, at any rate, the man cannot do who writes, or tells us, about it."¹⁰

So miracles were denied by the Deists. God couldn't break His own laws. They were regarded as proofs by the Christians. The maker of a machine is the very person to set it right if it goes wrong. Bishop Butler, in his *Analogy*

⁹ *Summa*, part i., Quæst. cv., Art. 6, *Summa contra Gentiles*, bk. iii., ch. xcix., c., and ci. Quoted in *Question Time*, p. 99-100.

¹⁰ *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*, c. vi. The full quotation in *Question Time*, p. 101.

(A.D. 1736), has a chapter on the "Particular Evidence for Christianity," which he finds in Miracles and Prophecy,¹¹ and the shallower but more popular Paley bases his *Evidences of Christianity* (A.D. 1794) in large part on their witness.

When, therefore, the sceptic Hume launched his famous attack in his famous essay *Of Miracles* (A.D. 1748), it was considered as destroying the bases of Christianity. He argued, in the phrase already generally accepted, that they were violations of the laws of nature, therefore it was always more probable that the evidence was mistaken than that they actually occurred; that that is what a law of nature means—a uniform experience, and if it is a uniform experience that miracles never happen they cannot ever have happened, and:

"as an uniform experience amounts to a proof, there is here a direct and full proof, from the nature of the fact, against the existence of any miracle."

"The plain consequence is," he continues:

"that no testimony is sufficient to establish a miracle unless the testimony is of such a kind that its falsehood would be more miraculous than the fact which it endeavours to establish."

It is true that he qualified this by saying that the proof of a miracle could never be sure enough to make it the foundation of a religion, and owned that "there may possibly be miracles or violations of the usual course of nature of such a kind as to admit proof from human testimony,"¹² but it was the uncompromising form of his statement that was quoted and to which his name was attached.

¹¹ *Analogy*, part ii., ch. 7.

¹² *Inquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, § 10, "Of Miracles," quoted in *Question Time*, p. 102.

Of course it was easy to see that this was simply a *petitio principii*, that it was "begging the question," and assuming what you were out to prove, to say that miracles can't happen and that therefore they never have happened.¹³ But the public mind is rarely logical, and does not easily detect fallacies when they are boldly asserted. Moreover, this idea of the impossibility of miracles was popularised by such men as the Rationalist Gibbon in his famous tenth chapter of his *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (1776-1788), in which with clever satire he included the evidence of miracles among the causes of the spread of Christianity in its early stages. The seed fell on favourable ground, and the book was read by men who did not study the serious arguments of Bishop Butler or even the practical common sense of Dr. Johnson.¹⁴

In the nineteenth century further influences combined to make it hard for men to believe in miracle. The enormous development of the Natural Sciences is one of the characteristic features of the age. This was based on the assumption of uniformity in the world. Its outlook was practically limited to Physics, to the material side of things as in Mathematics two hundred years before it had been mainly concerned with

¹³ It was pointed out by Geo. Campbell in his *Dissertation on Miracles*, in 1762, that Hume's use of the word "experience" involved a *petitio principii*.

¹⁴ Boswell's *Life of Samuel Johnson*, September 22, 1777: "Why, Sir, Hume taking the proposition simply is right. But the Christian revelation is not proved by the miracles alone, but as connected with prophecies, and with the doctrines in confirmation of which the miracles were wrought." Cp. also, July 21, 1763. Both passages are quoted in *Question Time*, p. 102-3.

number. Now, in working in a laboratory you rightly assume that there are fixed laws. You expect that the same experiment will produce the same result. You know, of course, quite well that there are other laws, that if the human element comes in and someone jogs your arm and upsets your test-tube your experiment will not come off.

But you quite rightly ignore this because what you are dealing with there is Chemistry. It was by concentrating attention on physical laws working without interference that Natural Science made its great advances. Even when dealing with the science of living things, with Biology, where laws are not so exact, they are far more often regular than not, and are always connected with uniform physical and mathematical laws. All this predisposed men's minds to see uniformity everywhere.

So when men like Thomas Huxley, who set themselves to popularise the results of Natural Science, insisted on the uniformity of Natural Law, they naturally, when provoked, attacked the miracles both of the Old and New Testaments. But even Huxley, while criticising the evidence for particular miracles, recognised that to define a miracle as a contradiction of the order of nature was self-contradictory, because all we know about the order of Nature is derived from our observation of the course of things, and if the course of things includes miracles they cannot be ruled out. "No event," he wrote:

"is too extraordinary to be possible; and therefore if by the term miracles we mean only 'extremely wonderful events,' there can be no just ground for the denying the possibility of their occurrence."¹⁵

¹⁵ *Hume*, "English Men of Letters," 1878, ch. vii., p. 133. Cp. *Essays*, vol. v., "Possibilities and Im-

This growing knowledge of Nature was, as it happened, associated with the struggle for political freedom. Adam Smith, in the eighteenth century, had studied the laws of Political Economy in his *Wealth of Nations* (1776).¹⁶ The aims of politicians were directed by the theories of Jeremy Bentham (1748-1832) towards "the greatest happiness of the greatest number."¹⁷ J. S. Mill, who tells the story of his upbringing in his *Autobiography*, became one of the great influences of mid-Victorian period and of the thought of the practical reformers of the Utilitarian school. It is true that he in his *Logic* wrote:

"A miracle is not a contradiction of the law of cause and effect. It is a new effect, supposed to be introduced by the introduction of a new cause,"¹⁸

possibilities" (Macmillan, written 1889-91), p. 204: "When it is rightly stated, the Agnostic view of 'miracles' is, in my judgment, unassailable. We are *not* justified in the *a priori* assertion that the order of nature, as experience has revealed it to us, cannot change. In arguing about the miraculous the assumption is illegitimate because it involves the whole point in dispute. Furthermore, it is an assumption which takes us beyond the range of our faculties. Obviously no amount of past experience can warrant us in anything more than a correspondingly strong expectation for the present and future."

¹⁶ According to Buckle (*History of Civilisation*, vol. i., p. 214): "In its ultimate results probably the most important (book) that had ever been written."

¹⁷ Cp. my *Lectures in Hyde Park*, Series II. (S.P.C.K., 1927), pp. 92, 106.

¹⁸ Ch. xxv., § 2. He continues: "All, therefore, which Hume has made out, and this he must be considered to have made out, is that no evidence can be sufficient to believe a miracle to anyone who did not

but men were primarily interested in practical problems. Charles Bradlaugh, the radical "atheist," found his particular career thwarted by the necessity of taking the Parliamentary Oath, which he could not in conscience do (1880). Karl Marx (1818-1883), whose economic writings have had such a fatal influence today, assumed that belief in miracles was a superstition, that this world was all, and "religion the opium of the people" (surely one of the silliest sayings that have ever become a slogan), because these ideas were supposed to be bound up with his social theories. At the same time in cultured and literary circles Matthew Arnold, the apostle of liberalism in religious thought, was arguing, quite rightly, that if he could turn a pen into a penwiper it was no proof that what he wrote with his pen was true, and, equally wrongly, gave it as his authoritative conclusion that "miracles do not happen."¹⁹

A third influence against the belief in the possibility of miracles was to be found in the influence of German Theology. The old-fashioned rationalistic theologian explained away the miracles of the New Testament. The school of Strauss denied

previously believe in the existence of a being or beings with supernatural power; or who believed himself to have full proof that the character of the being whom he recognises is inconsistent with his having seen fit to interfere on the occasion in question."

¹⁹ *Literature and Dogma* (Smith, Elder, 1873, Popular Edition, 1904), ch. v., "The Proof from Miracles," p. 95: "That miracles when fully believed are felt by men in general to be a source of authority it is absurd to deny. One may say indeed: 'Suppose I could change the pen with which I write this into a penwiper, I should not make what I say any the truer or more convincing.' That may be so in reality, but the mass of mankind feel differently."

that there was any basis at all for them, and attributed the stories about them to the myth-making tendencies of man. The critical school of Tübingen attacked the genuineness of the documents altogether, and declared at first that they were late second-century productions. Now German scholarship has always been marked by immense painstaking erudition. German students have a wonderful power of diligent accumulation of detail. In any branch of science you must know German to be sure that you have considered the whole of the evidence. Moreover, Germans are critical, and to be sure that you are not mistaken you must let yourself be criticised.

But German scholarship is not so conspicuous for sound judgment. True, one scholar generally criticises another and points out his mistakes, but more than that is needed. Before the war Germany had a mass of correct, detailed information about things in England. The events proved that her judgment was not equal to her knowledge and that she entirely misunderstood the English people. In Theology especially you must have insight as well as knowledge, and insight comes from training. The German Liberal Protestant theologians were for the most part trained in a Christianity that had no succession of bishops and had lost its continuity with the past, and in consequence also, to a great extent, lost its belief in the Sacraments. With the loss of Sacraments had gone the loss of the sense of worship, and with the loss of Sacraments and worship had gone the belief in the Incarnation and the power to judge of Christ.

Its theology therefore, for the most part, denied the possibility of miracles, and its works were widely read in the sixties and seventies of the last century. As published in such articles as

those of Professor Schmiedel in the *Encyclopædia Biblica* (1899), it has been seized upon by Secularist propaganda and freely quoted in the publications of the Rationalist Press Association.

These various influences have been affecting our minds for the last three hundred years and prejudice us more than we are aware of. They make it difficult for the mass of men to consider the question of miracles without bias.²⁰

II

Let us try, therefore, to start afresh and reconsider the whole question. People reject miracles today because they go against the idea of the reign of law. What is the "Reign of Law"? What do we mean by "Law"?

The word "law" has two meanings. There is the law of the law-giver, and there are scientific laws. These are the two chief senses in which the word is used. The *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* gives the following definitions:

"I. The body of rules, whether formally enacted or customary, which a state or community recognises as binding on its members or its subjects, and:

"II. The scientific and philosophical uses—a theoretical principle deduced from particular facts expressible by the statement that a particular phenomenon always occurs if certain conditions are present."

Let us try and get these two more clear. First, the laws of the law-giver, whether made by King or Custom.

²⁰ See further for the above, A. C. Headlam, *The Miracles of the New Testament*, Moorhouse Lectures for 1904 (Murray, 1915).

We live under laws made by Parliament. It is, normally, wrong to break these. They may be good or bad. If they are bad they may be altered. But there are also laws of God. Sometimes the two clash. Then we must obey the laws of the higher authority. We must "render unto Cæsar the things that are Cæsar's, but unto God the things that are God's."

The classic example of the clash of God's law and man's law is that presented in Sophocles' play *Antigone*. King Creon had ordered that the body of Antigone's brother, Polynices, should remain unburied. Antigone, holding that a sister's duty should come first, disobeys the command, and when Creon asks:

"Didst thou not know the edicts which forbade
The things thou ownest?"

replies:

"Right well I knew them all.

* * * * *

Nor did I deem thy edicts strong enough,
Coming from mortal man, to set at nought
The unwritten laws of God that know not change.
They are not of to-day nor yesterday,
But live for ever, nor can man assign
When they first sprang to being. Not through
fear
Of any man's resolve was I prepared
Before the Gods to bear the penalty
Of sinning against these."²¹

Both Creon's commands and the unchanging laws of God are law in the same sense of commands.

Scientific laws are quite different. They are generalised observation. Men observe, for instance, that things contract with cold and expand

²¹ Tr, E. H. Plumptre, l. 453

with heat. Iron gates set in railings stick in the summer unless space has been allowed for expansion. Gaps have to be left between the rails on railway lines or else in hot weather they will swell and buckle. That metals expand with heat is a scientific law, and on its working we base our making of thermometers to register the temperature exactly. But such laws are only approximate. New factors are found and new discoveries made which modify the old ones. For instance, water just before freezing begins to expand. That is why our pipes burst in winter.

The law of gravitation was said to have been discovered by Newton observing an apple fall. The fact that large masses attract one another is the cause of the tides, since the moon draws the earth's water to itself. This is for all practical purposes a universal law. The stars in their courses "obey" it. But it has no moral authority like the law of the land. It is often our duty to interfere with its working. If we see an apple falling we try to catch it and prevent its being bruised. If a man is going to jump out of a window we catch hold of him and "interfere with" the law of gravitation. Men are always seeking for methods to harness the tides and "break the law" that the moon always draws the earth's water after it, so as to bend it to their purposes.

Or again, men have noticed that, as they say, the sun rises every morning, though as a matter of fact it is the earth that turns round so that it seems to us to rise. They see this day after day and make out a general law about what they observe. They generalise their observations. Does this law exist outside the minds of the man who makes it? Can a generalisation or rule exist without a person to generalise it or draw up the rule? If the facts are such that we can

draw up a law, is it only in our own minds, or must we say that it is in God's mind and that we have discovered it? In old days men were divided into nominalists and realists. The nominalists said that the law only existed in our minds who made them. The realists said that they existed eternally in the mind of God. But in either case this law exists in a mind.²²

Now we are right in assuming that laws are uniform when we are studying mathematics. Twice two is always four. If it were sometimes three and sometimes five we could never be sure of adding up a sum right. This is because that is what "two" and "four" mean.

Mathematics deals with abstractions. In Arithmetic we put aside all other matters and simply think of number. In Geometry we think of measurements, but only of measurements. There is no such thing in life as a line—length without breadth. In Algebra we substitute symbols, x and y , for numbers, work with them and turn the results back from symbols to figures. It saves time and the results are absolutely accurate, because all we work out is already implied in what we start with.

In Physical Sciences we also rightly assume the universality of certain laws. In Astronomy, Chemistry, Geology, Dynamics, Mechanics, we assume that things will always happen in the same

²² Cp. Bp. Butler, *Sermon XV.*, "Upon the Ignorance of Man," § 5: "What are the laws by which matter acts upon matter, but certain effects, which some, having observed to be frequently repeated, have reduced to general rules." Cp. B. H. Streeter, *Adventure* (Macmillan, 1927), p. 9: "A Law, then, is a generalisation from observed facts possessing greater probability than a hypothesis; it is a hypothesis which has been widely verified."

way, that water will always boil at the same temperature if the conditions are unaltered. So men have drawn their conclusions from observation and, finding them correct, assume that the laws they have deduced will go on working in the same way.²³ But the matter is more difficult when you come to Biology, the science of living things. Plants and animals are much more complicated and you can't try experiments on them in the same way. There are so many laws to discover that they are difficult to disentangle. Besides, living things seem to have a will of their own. Our generalisations about them cannot be so exact. The laws we discover are only approximately true.

Still more is this the case with human beings. When we examine how men live together, in Politics; how they create wealth, in Economics; how they feel, in Psychology; how they express themselves, in Art and Music; we find indeed that there seem to be laws. But they are impossible to define exactly. Long ago Aristotle said that you cannot expect to find the same accuracy in all thought as in mathematics—you can only get it as far as the nature of the subject allows.²⁴ The

²³ Cp. J. Ward, *The Realm of Ends, or Pluralism and Theism* (Cambridge, 1912), p. 277: "Scientific knowledge . . . is possible only on the assumption that events actually happen with strict and uniform regularity. Now there is one theory of the world, and one only, which would justify this assumption completely, and that one is the mechanical theory. Accordingly the postulate of the uniformity of nature is frequently converted into the theorem that nature is a mechanical system; and thus a methodological principle becomes an ontological dogma."

²⁴ *Eth. Nic.*, bk. i., ch. iii., § 1: "The same exactness must not be expected in all departments of

human factor has to be reckoned with and, as they say in Yorkshire: "There's nowt so queer as folk." Life has to be lived, certainly, against a background of fixed laws in material things. As has been said, if water sometimes boiled and sometimes did not, you could never ask a friend to tea, but, though you can rely on the law that water boils at a temperature of 212 degrees Fahrenheit, you cannot be so certain that your friend will accept your invitation, or keep his engagement if he does.

Now the Theist says that all these laws, whether of the physical order, of the animal order, or of the moral order, are laws in the mind of God. The believer in God is a Realist in the sense that he believes they are there in His purpose before they are discovered by man. He believes that God wills a uniformity of law in the course of nature, that He works by general laws. As has been said: "Nature doesn't talk, she strikes." This causes one of the greatest difficulties to a belief in God. Earthquakes and pestilences act in accordance with general laws. When Pope asked:

"Shall gravitation cease, if you go by?"²⁵

philosophy alike, any more than in all the products of the arts and crafts. . . . It is the mark of an educated mind to expect that amount of exactness in each kind which the nature of the particular subject admits. It is equally unreasonable to accept merely probable conclusions from a mathematician and to demand strict demonstration from an orator."

²⁵ *Essay on Man*, Ep. iv., l. 128. Cp. Ep. i., l. 140:

"But errs not Nature from this gracious end,
From burning suns when livid deaths descend,

he did not really meet our difficulty. On the whole, we can see that it is best that "the first Almighty Cause" should act "not by partial but by general laws," or else we could never have conquered Nature by obeying her. But often it seems hard to reconcile this working with the idea of the goodness of God.

Many of these laws are still unknown, but it is a mistake to describe the results of such unknown laws as miracles. To a savage, the result of opening a soda-water bottle may seem a miracle, but when travellers have tried to impress uncivilised men by such a "miracle" they have been laying up trouble for themselves in the future. They will find out all about it later on and distrust the white man for ever.

No! A miracle is the working of a higher law overruling the action of a mechanical or physical law. Just as the human will acts on the material body and over-rules it—though we do not call the action of living things over dead matter miraculous—so, when a spiritual power overrules either, or both, natural laws or human actions, we call that a miracle. A miracle then is not merely something wonderful, it is a sign, a sign of higher power. A miracle may be defined in many ways. Perhaps as good a definition as we can get is "an event in physical nature which

When earthquakes swallow, or when tempests
sweep

Towns to one grave, whole nations to the deep ?

'No ('tis reply'd), the first Almighty Cause

Acts not by partial but by gen'ral laws;

The exceptions few.' "

For the whole question, see *Lectures in Hyde Park*, Series II., Lecture VI., "The Problem of Pain."

makes unmistakably plain the presence and direct action of God working for a moral end."²⁶ That is to say, miracles are above natural law but not contrary to it.²⁷ They are not unnatural but supernatural.

III

So the question whether miracles are possible is a matter of history and not primarily one of theory. It is a matter of evidence. Huxley once spoke somewhere of "a theory killed by a fact." If there is good evidence of a single miracle having really taken place that disposes of the *a priori* theory that "miracles do not happen," in the sense, that is, not that "they do not happen *as a rule*," but that they never have happened and cannot happen.

So what is needed for studying the question is an open mind, one that has not prejudged the question—*i.e.*, that is without prejudice; an historical knowledge that can collect the evi-

²⁶ C. Gore, *The Incarnation of the Son of God*, Bampton Lectures for the year 1891 (Murray), p. 45. The definition of the *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* is: "A marvellous event exceeding the known powers of nature, and therefore supposed to be due to the special intervention of the Deity, or of some supernatural agency; chiefly an act (*e.g.*, of healing) exhibiting control over the laws of nature, and serving as evidence that the agent is either divine, or specially favoured by God."

²⁷ Cp. A. C. Headlam, *Miracles*, p. 84: "When people say that anything is contrary to the laws of nature, they mean really either that it is contrary to the particular form of scientific opinion prevailing at the time; or that it is contrary to experience; and the most complete human experience is very limited."

dence for and against; and an historical sense that knows how to criticise that evidence, and form a balanced judgment from the facts. It is this last that is so specially difficult to secure nowadays, since our whole way of thinking is so heavily biassed against miracle by the course of life and thought during these last three hundred years.²⁸

The first requisite is a mind that has not prejudged the question, for no one can decide any question without bias of some sort. Our education, our surroundings, our very knowledge of the subject must influence us. Other considerations must come in beyond the mere balancing of the facts *pro* and *con*. For we judge questions not merely by the intellect alone but by feelings and moral considerations as well.

So moral judgment has its part in weighing the evidence for miracles. If something is claimed as a sign of God's action which flatly contradicts our idea of God Himself we do not believe it, be the evidence ever so strong. A man may read that discoveries have proved that the wall of Jericho fell down flat (though the Hebrew only means "in its place"), but he may continue to

²⁸ Cp. H. M. Gwatkin, *The Knowledge of God* (T. and T. Clark, 1907), vol. i., p. 183: "As the early Christians were ordered straight to execution the moment they declared themselves Christians, so miracle is condemned the moment it appears as miracle. Its opponents, to do them justice, are polite enough to give it a trial, but it is only a sort of *post mortem* trial, subject to the condition that the evidence shall in no case be allowed to affect the sentence that has been already passed." So the Queen of Hearts said at the trial in Wonderland: "Sentence first—verdict afterwards," *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, ch. xii.

disbelieve that the story is one of miracle on the ground that it strikes him as unfair that Jehovah should have played such a trick. If he dislikes old Prospero for pulling the strings with his magic on his island in Shakespeare's *Tempest*, he will refuse to believe that God employed what he would call tricks for the Israelites. He may agree that little boys ought not to call old men "bald head," but he will hold that to be devoured by bears is an entirely disproportionate punishment for bad manners, and will refuse to believe that the story of Elisha and the children is true (apart from its insufficient historical evidence), because it implies an absolutely wrong idea of God.²⁹

But the application of exactly the same method will compel his acceptance of the New Testament miracles, with the possible exception of a few minor details here and there. If he believes from his moral judgment of the character and person of Christ, Jesus of Nazareth, that He was more than man, he will consider it only natural that He should have had power over the forces of Nature. If he believes in the unique nature of His life he will find it perfectly possible to believe it natural that He should not have been overcome by Death, and will find the evidence for His Resurrection conclusive. If he believes from His personality, His life, His influence in the world, that He was the Divine Word incarnate, he will see that, being different from all other men, it was only natural that He should have been born

²⁹ Cp. Bp. Butler, *Analogy*, pt. ii., ch. iii., § 1: "(a supposed revelation) may contain clear immoralities or contradictions, and either of these would prove it false." Of course the story of the bears may easily be read as an historical but not miraculous event.

differently from all other men too, and will accept the story of the Virgin birth and find the evidence for it sufficient, though otherwise he might have considered it inadequate.³⁰

So, too, the evidence for miracles must be taken as a whole, and for this some knowledge of the nature of evidence is necessary. "The truth of our religion," wrote Bishop Butler, "like the truth of common matters, is to be judged by all the evidence taken together."³¹ Thus St. Mark's Gospel is acknowledged to be the earliest of our four Gospels. It is a specially human Christ that is portrayed there. But the whole story is full of miracles. You cannot cut them out without reducing the book to scraps. Or, again, the feeding of the five thousand as told in St. John's Gospel caused the multitude to follow Him for more loaves and fishes. He spoke to them (ch. vi.) of Himself as the bread which came down from heaven, and so alienated all but those who were capable of understanding and being taught. Three years after, He put that teaching into practical form by the institution of the Sacrament at the Last Supper. After His Resurrection the disciples continued in "the breaking of bread and the prayers" (Acts ii. 42), and the Eucharist or thanks-

³⁰ Cp. *Discours* (de Pascal) de Filleau de la Chaise: "à en juger sainement, il n'est pas moins au-dessus de l'homme de vivre comme il a vécu et comme il veut que nous vivions, que de ressusciter les morts et de transporter les montagnes." Quoted p. 120, and summarised by H. F. Stewart in his *The Holiness of Pascal* (Cambridge, 1915), p. 58: "Such a life as His is as great a miracle as to raise the dead or to transport mountains. None but God could have set such an ideal, none but God could have fulfilled it."

³¹ *Analogy*, pt. ii., ch. vii. § 43.

giving has been the centre of Christian life ever since. Cut out the miracle and the peg on which it hangs is missing. Of course the teaching could have been given and the Sacrament instituted without the miracle of the feeding, but the historical evidence shows the connexion of one event with another as they actually took place.³²

So, again, we find after the Crucifixion the disciples were utterly cast down. A few weeks later we find them entirely changed, bold in speech, defying the authorities, ready for persecution and death. The account of the Resurrection explains the change. Cut it out and the whole becomes inexplicable. This was seen long ago. Origen (A.D. 185-254) declared in writing his *Against Celsus* that:

"the zeal with which they devoted themselves to the work of conversion, encountering every danger, is a clear proof of the Resurrection of Jesus: for they could not have taught it with this earnestness had they feigned such an event; they could not have inculcated contempt of death upon others and exemplified it in themselves."³³

So, later, the great preacher of Constantinople, John Chrysostom, asked:

"Had Christ not really risen from the dead, how do we account for the fact that the apostles, who

³² Of course the Christian revelation *could* have been made without miracle, and our Lord *might* have been born of a human father like other men, but we are dealing with history and evidence and not with what "might have been." Cp. Bacon, *Apophthegms New and Old*, No. 243: "Æneas Sylvius would say, that the Christian faith and law, though it had not been confirmed by miracles, yet was worthy to be received for the honesty thereof."

³³ *Contra Celsum*, ii. 56.

in their behaviour to Him living had shown such weakness and cowardice that they deserted and betrayed Him, after His death showed such zeal that they laid down their lives for Him ?”³⁴

“ I only believe those stories,” wrote Pascal, “ whose witnesses got themselves killed.”³⁵

It is true that our attitude towards the New Testament miracles has changed in the last two hundred years. Then they were regarded as signs of God’s “ interference ” with the mechanical order of the world. Consequently they were appealed to as “ proofs.” Now the order has changed. We feel they themselves have to be proved. Proof is now felt to begin on other grounds. It comes from our judgment of the character and claims of Christ. The proof of Christianity lies rather, as it lay for the first disciples, in recognition, first of His claim on our lives. That being made, the signs follow as they did to them, to tell us more of His character, to show His power, to reveal His nature. His miracles are regarded now less as proofs than as the natural outcome of what is proved and accepted on other grounds.³⁶

³⁴ *In St. Ignat.*, tom. ii., 599, quoted in J. B. Mozley’s *Miracles*, p. 249, notes to Lecture I., where many other passage from the Fathers are collected.

³⁵ *Pensées*, ed. Brunschvicg, No. 593: “ Je ne crois que les histoires dont les témoins se feraient égorger.” Cp. Bp. Butler, *Analogy*, Bk. II., ch. vii.: “ And a person’s laying down his life in attestation of facts or of opinions is the strongest proof of his believing them.”

³⁶ Single New Testament miracles may rest upon misinterpretation or misunderstandings. This may be the case, *e.g.*, with the story of the Gadarene swine chosen by T. Huxley for attack. It is less probable that two should be, and the improbability

One question remains: "Why are there no miracles now?" What are we to say to this?

In the first place it would be a rash thing to state that there are none. Many people believe that they are wrought yearly at Lourdes. This is not the place to go into the question of their genuineness, but at least there are happenings there inexplicable by any known laws, and many devout persons believe that they are in the strict sense miraculous. There are phenomena of faith-healing which may be called events in physical nature which make plain (if not unmistakably) the presence and direct action of God working for a moral end. It would be going beyond what the evidence warrants to deny altogether the occurrence of miracles today.

But, normally speaking, there are none. We do not expect them, and feel we are right in not

increases in geometrical progression the more such explanations are multiplied. Cp. Headlam, *op. cit.*, p. 51: "Take one or two isolated miracles and it is possible to rationalize them, but attempt to apply such a system to the whole number, and the result is a picture which, to any person of literary insight or intelligence, becomes impossible."

Cp. also Ronald Knox, *Some Loose Stones* (Longmans, 1914), p. 49: "Orthodox theology explains all the miracles recorded of our Saviour under one single hypothesis—He was omnipotent God. But the enemy of miracle is forced to give a variety of different explanations—that the healing of the sick was faith-healing, the stilling of the storm coincidence, the feeding of the five thousand a misrepresented sacrament, the withering of the fig tree a misrepresented parable, the raising of Lazarus a premature burial, and so on. Certainly it does seem odd that all these non-miraculous events should have combined to produce a presumption of the miraculous."

expecting them. For we realise that in normal times it is better for our education that we should not expect abnormal occurrences. We are here, we believe, for the moulding and forging of our characters under conditions which God has ordained. For that purpose it is better to be under fixed laws.³⁷ Moreover, recent advance in knowledge has impressed on us more and more, that God orders the scene of our discipline by fixed laws. In the Dark Ages before men realised this fact they naturally expected miracles, and God may therefore have more frequently worked them. Now we feel that to work normally by rule, and only when necessary by exceptional acts, is a sign of a higher and of the Highest Mind. "The greater a man is," wrote Dr. Illingworth:

"the more methodical and consistent he will be in all the usual situations of life; one whose conduct can be calculated, and whose character relied on. But, in a crisis, the same greatness will be shown by ability to extemporise and courage to innovate; while lesser men are paralysed by slavish adherence to routine. . . . So the habitual course of nature, which alone makes life and knowledge possible, may well be traversed by lightning flashes from the spiritual world, if both alike are being guided by one power to one end, and that end, in the strict sense, supernatural."³⁸

³⁷ Cp. W. C. D. Dampier Whetham, *A History of Science* (Cambridge, 1929), p. 474: "It must not be forgotten that for effective freedom of the will, nature must be orderly. No condition is so servile as that of him who is subject to a capricious and incalculable tyrant. To be master of our lives, we must be able to steer our course over well-chartered seas, as well as have power to control the rudder."

³⁸ *Divine Immanence* (Murray, 1898), p. 110. Cp. A. E. Taylor, *The Faith of a Moralist* (Macmillan,

Such were the New Testament times. The life of Christ was such a lightning flash from the spiritual world against the dark background of long ages. His acts were in the strictest sense supernatural. Those were times, too, when it was harder to believe and so, not unnaturally, miracles helped in the days when the Apostles had to face the world. Now the evidence of Christ's claim has been tested. We have behind us the experience of history, of generations of men who have put His words to the test and found salvation in them.³⁹

I do not know where this is better put than in a poem of Browning called *A Death in the Desert*. The poet imagines the scene of the death of St. John, and his last words to a few disciples who ask him questions. The questions are, of course,

1930), vol. ii., p. 105. After arguing that genius does not lie in eccentricity and that the great man is the man on whom we can count, he writes: "It is neither the absence of surprises, nor the perpetual recurrence of surprises of every conceivable sort, that reveals intelligence behind a career or a work of art, it is the presence of the right kind of surprise at the right place."

³⁹ This was pointed out long ago by Chrysostom (*Hom. in 1 Cor. vi. 2*; Migne, *P.G.*, lxi., col. 50) and by Augustine (*De Civ. Dei*, xxii. 8; Migne, *P.L.*, xli., col. 760). Cp. A. C. Headlam, *Christian Theology* (Oxford, 1934), p. 258: "Remember that Christianity comes to us with a record of nearly nineteen centuries of progress and power. . . . To the original followers it came with no such record; it came, in fact, with everything against it. . . . Would it have been possible for men to accept him as they did, unless there had been some direct evidence of his superhuman claims, which helped and strengthened their faith? I very much doubt it."

those of mid-Victorian England, but the answers are such as a nineteenth or twentieth century St. John might be giving. The question of miracles is raised. St. John speaks:

“ I cried once, ‘ That ye may believe in Christ,
Behold this blind man shall receive his sight !’
I cry now, ‘ Urgest thou, *for I am shrewd,*
And smile at stories how John’s word could cure—
Repeat that miracle and take my faith ?’
I say, that miracle was duly wrought
When, save for it, no faith was possible.

* * * * *

So faith grew, making void more miracles
Because too much: they would compel, not
help.”⁴⁰

⁴⁰ *Works* (Smith, Elder, 1896), vol. i., p. 590.
Cp. p. 589:

“ I say that man was made to grow, not stop;
That help, he needed once, and needs no more,
Having grown but an inch by, is withdrawn:
For he hath new needs, and new helps to these.”

CHAPTER II

THE EVIDENCE FOR THE RESURRECTION OF CHRIST

"In the testimony of others is to be considered (1) the number; (2) the integrity; (3) the skill of the witnesses; (4) the design of the author, where it is a testimony out of a book cited; (5) the consistency of the parts and the circumstances of the relation; (6) contrary testimonies."—J. LOCKE, *Essay Concerning the Human Understanding*, bk. iv., ch. xv., 4.

MANY years ago now I read a book which caused a considerable stir when it was written. It was one of Mrs. Humphry Ward's first novels, *Robert Elsmere*. It told the story of a young clergyman in whose parish there was an agnostic squire who knew German and lent him books of German theology. These books denied that the accounts of our Lord's Resurrection were historical.

The young clergyman was, of course, represented as having studied the question before, but only on "orthodox" lines. We were told that as he read he recalled all the "stock apologetic arguments," but that their "force and vitality was gone."¹

I remember that I was not impressed. I might even say I was angry. I was critical enough to

¹ Vol. ii., p. 277: "One morning he stood reading in the window of the library the last of the squire's letters. It contained a short but masterly analysis of the mental habits and idiosyncrasies of St. Paul apropos of St. Paul's witness to the Resurrection. Every now and then, as *Elsmere* turned the pages, the orthodox protest would assert itself, the orthodox arguments would make themselves felt, as though in mechanical involuntary protest. But their force and vitality was gone."

realise that a novel is a most unsatisfactory instrument of theological propaganda. The author can make her characters say and do what she likes. If Miss Edna Lyall's books, which were coming out about the same time, did not prove that all good young men were Christians or became so, and that all atheists were villains or were converted, neither did Mrs. Humphry Ward's sceptical squire and sincere parson who gave up his faith in the Resurrection prove that only stupid and insincere people still believed in it. I saw that in both cases the books only merely showed what the author herself thought.

But what made me angry was, first, the assumption that no parson, even if he had been at a public school and a university, had ever had doubts about Christianity and faced them. I had been at a public school myself. And, secondly, the airy way in which the authoress spoke of the "stock apologetic arguments" and swept them aside.² I had recently begun my theology for the schools, and had been reading Dr. Westcott, and hearing Dr. Gore lecture, on the subject at the Pusey House. I wondered whether she knew what those "stock arguments" were. I felt sure that, whatever her views might be, she had no right to settle the question in a sentence for a public ignorant, for the most part, as to what constitutes good evidence in general, and what was the evidence for the Resurrection of our Lord in particular.

² Cp. vol. i., p. 128, where we read that the hero after letting his sceptical tutor know that he intended to take Orders "had got hold of all the stock apologetic arguments and used them, his companion admitted, with ability and ingenuity."

I

One of the laws of evidence is that it should be strong in proportion as the event to which it witnesses is strange or important.³ Thus, if you are lying ill in bed, and someone comes and tells you that he has just seen a man in the street, you believe him without any difficulty. The street is the place where men are met, and in nine hundred and ninety-nine cases out of a thousand it does not in the least matter whether you meet them or not. But if he comes in and tells you he has just seen the Prime Minister go by, you hesitate. "Does he know him by sight?" you ask. If several come in and tell you the same thing you are more ready to believe, especially if they do not all come in together, but come in one after another, or, if acquainted with one another, are of different sorts, of different ages, or belong to different sets.

If they say the same thing in the same words

³ This has been described as "the principle" of the "great exponent of the mechanical view of the universe, Laplace," that "the weight of the evidence should be proportional to the strangeness of the alleged facts," by Prof. W. McDougall in his *Outline of Abnormal Psychology* (Methuen, 1926), p. 508, as insisted on by Prof. Th. Flournoy. But as Dr. H. M. Gwatkin points out in his *The Knowledge of God* (T. and T. Clark, 1907), vol. i., p. 191: "It is a common fallacy to suppose that extraordinary events require an extraordinary weight of evidence to prove them. No doubt we make a difference between a fact of weighty meaning and an unimportant story. But our inference is not, 'We want double evidence'; it is a very different one, 'We must make doubly sure that we have sufficient evidence.'"

you are suspicious, just as a schoolmaster suspects something if two boys send up an answer in an examination in just the same words. He finds out whether they were sitting next to one another. If your friends differ in the details they give, such as, for instance, the sort of hat he was wearing or the kind of car he was riding in, whether he had one or two chauffeurs, you are more ready to believe them. It shows at least that the whole story was not made up.

If they are people you can trust it makes a difference. Some people are habitually inaccurate. Others always like to tell a good story and touch up details. They have what has been called "a talent for embroidery." Some have their own idea of humour, and think it funny to try and take you in. But you know these people and discount what they say. They are the exceptions among your friends.

If, further, they have no reason for taking you in; if it is not the morning of the first of April; if they have no bet on the subject; if they have nothing to gain by what they say; all this strengthens their evidence. If what they say tells against them; if, for instance, your visitor had been a militant "suffragette" in the days of the old "votes for women" agitation, and told you how just as she was going to throw a bag of flour over the Prime Minister, a policeman caught hold of her arm and emptied it all over her own dress, why, then you would have been pretty sure that she had not made it all up.

If, in addition to the words of your friends, you remember, though you had not paid much attention to it at the time, that you had read in the paper the day before that he was coming to lay the foundation-stone of some new building

in the neighbourhood; if, further, as you lay in bed you had heard the cheering of the crowds as he passed by; if the next day, when you were better, you had gone out and seen the workmen busy with the rest of the foundations, and in the weeks following had seen the walls of the town hall or school rising; if, moreover, you knew that, being the man he was, it was just the sort of thing you would have expected him to come and do—why, then your doubts would have been quite cleared away. Though you had not seen him yourself when he passed, the evidence would be sufficient to make you practically certain that he had done so.

Now Christianity cannot claim to be exempt from the ordinary laws of evidence.⁴ It cannot

⁴ It is sometimes said the evidence for the Resurrection is “not sufficient to hang a man.” If by this is meant that the witnesses cannot be called into court and cross-examined, it is of course true. But, then, there is no evidence enough to hang a man about anything in the historical past. As Dr. Headlam says (*Christian Theology*, p. 252): “There is no demonstrative evidence in historical problems,” or, as Bp. Lightfoot said, “in the land of the unverifiable there are no efficient police.”

Again, “if by evidence is meant, as it usually is, historical testimony, this is not a fixed quantity, the same for every reasonable man, no matter what may be his other opinions” (A. J. Balfour, *Foundations of Belief*, p. 313). But, after all, there is such a thing as historical evidence, and we do not wait in practical matters for certainty. As Dr. Creighton wrote (*Life and Letters*, Longmans, 1906, vol. ii., p. 105): “People’s ideas about the nature of evidence are very vague. One of my clergy told me he was at dinner with an eminent lawyer, who said: ‘I go to Church and bring up my children as Christians; but I am bound to say

say that you must believe on faith, though there is no proof at all that it is true. But neither can it allow its opponents to beg the question. They must not say, "the Resurrection cannot have taken place—therefore it didn't." As in the case of the Prime Minister's visit, we must ask:

1. Who were the witnesses ?
2. Were they trustworthy ?
3. What signs were there before, at the time, and after ?

II

First, who were the witnesses ?

We have a list of these in 1 Cor. xv. The first Epistle to the Corinthians is universally accepted by all serious critics as a genuine letter of St. Paul. Doubt has been cast on the authenticity of nearly all the others. We need not go into the question here as to how those doubts have been met. No scholar of any standing questions this epistle or this chapter of it. It was written about the year A.D. 54 from Ephesus. That is to say, twenty to twenty-four years after the events of our Lord's life. This, as things go, is a short time. It is forty-seven years since I first read *Robert Elsmere*, but I have not forgotten it. Besides, St. Paul refers to a tradition: "I delivered unto you." That he did four years before, about the year 50, when he first came to

that there is not so much evidence for it as would hang a man.' But the evidence necessary to hang a man is far beyond that on which we act for any practical venture of our own. Did he have such evidence for the character of his wife before he married her as would suffice to hang a man ?"

Corinth and gave his message. Even then it was no new thing. He was giving them, he says, "that which also I received," some time before.⁵ This brings the interval between the time of his writing and the Resurrection itself to about twenty years, about such an interval as separates us from the Great War, which we older people remember only too clearly.

The passage runs:

"that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that He appeared to Cephas; then to the twelve; then He appeared to above five hundred brethren at once, of whom the greater part remain until now, but some are fallen asleep; then He appeared to James; then to all the apostles; and last of all, as to one born out of due time, he appeared to me also."

There are several points in this that we may notice. (1) It is apparently a sort of official list, not so much of appearances as of those who could be referred to as witnesses. The twelve apparently includes St. Matthias, chosen to take the place of Judas. The list is not complete. Several persons are omitted who might have been included. Joseph called Barsabbas had been with the Risen Christ but was not elected to be one of

⁵ Cp. E. G. Selwyn, in Dr. Gore's *New Commentary on Holy Scripture*, part iii., "The New Testament," *The Evidence for the Resurrection*, p. 301: "In this chapter, written not later than the middle fifties of the first century, St. Paul reminds his readers of the teaching he had given them in person some five or six years previously; and he says that that teaching was identical with the instruction he had himself received on the subject. We are thus taken back to within ten years of the crucifixion of our Lord."

the twelve (Acts i. 22), though he may have been one of "all the apostles." There is no mention of any women. Josephus tells us that "the testimony of women is not to be admitted because of their levity and impudence, nor is that of slaves."⁶ Even if their testimony might have been considered valid, as we see it was by the Evangelists, it might still have been unpleasant for them to be appealed to in public. It was not necessary. There were enough witnesses without.

(2) The list fits in with the Gospels. But it was written twenty or thirty years before St. John wrote. While not saying just the same things, and while giving an independent account, it says nothing to contradict it. It comes from a city five hundred miles away from Palestine, yet it harmonises with the first three Gospels which give the tradition as it arose there. They do not give just the same facts. For instance, the appearance to the two disciples going to Emmaus is not referred to. St. Luke's Gospel does not seem to have been written when St. Paul wrote to Corinth, but it neither copies nor contradicts it, while it corroborates the list.

(3) That is to say, in the year 54 St. Paul says there are two hundred and fifty people at least, if we are to take the words "the greater part" literally, who can be appealed to. He would hardly have written this unless he was ready to say where some at least of them were to be found.

⁶ Cp. F. J. Foakes Jackson, *Josephus and the Jews* (S.P.C.K., 1930), p. 65, who adds a note that this is "not in the Law but is in accordance with Rabbinic tradition," and refers to G. F. Moore, *Judaism*, vol. ii., p. 185.

(4) This is perhaps all the more important since single individuals may always be mistaken. It is hardly likely that large numbers would be. And if the appearance to the five hundred was unique there are recorded several instances of smaller bodies of men seeing Him. It was a case of observation of fact, not of spreading of idea. Ideas are often spread by mass suggestion, by contagion in a crowd. Facts are only seen by a number at a time, if they are there to be seen.

When we come to evidence from other sources we find that the writers belong to different groups. We saw that three friends coming in together to tell you about the Prime Minister might be hoaxing you with a made-up story. So, no doubt, the accounts in the three first or Synoptic Gospels are connected with one another.

But they do not stand alone. They represent the early teaching of Palestine, as given by St. Peter and recorded by St. Mark, by St. Luke's friends "which from the beginning were eye-witnesses," by hearers of St. Matthew, if not by St. Matthew himself. But there are others from similar sources. The first Epistle of St. Peter may be said to be one of these. It speaks (ch. i. 3) of "a lively hope by the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead." The first half of the Acts gives us what St. Luke gathered from his informants, possibly during his stay at Cæsarea and Jerusalem in the years 56-58.⁷ There seems, too, to have been a collection of sayings, that both St. Matthew and St. Luke used, which students

⁷ Cp. C. H. Turner, in Hastings' *Dictionary of the Bible* (T. and T. Clark, 1898), art. "Chronology of the New Testament," pp. 423, 424.

have called Q. Though the writer, or collector, of these naturally does not describe the Resurrection, his work would hardly have been accepted if he had not shared the belief of the Evangelists that it had really taken place.

Then there is the whole body of Pauline teaching, both that directly from his pen and that described in the last half of the Acts. Some of this is first-hand description. The writer of considerable sections speaks of what "we" did. It represents Church life over a large area. St. Paul's letters were written between the years 52 and 60, from, and to, Ephesus, Corinth, Thessalonica, Philippi, and Rome. The Resurrection of our Lord was not disputed at Corinth. Some Corinthian Christians were doubtful about the resurrection of man, at any rate about a bodily resurrection; St. Paul argues for it from the undisputed fact that Christ had risen—"How say some among you that there is no resurrection from the dead? If there is no resurrection neither hath Christ been raised, and if Christ hath not been raised then is our preaching vain, and your faith is also vain." It is like Euclid ending the proof of a theorem with a Q.E.A., "which is absurd." The belief in the Resurrection was held already at Rome when St. Paul wrote to the Romans. He had never been there, yet he could assume it as an established and unquestioned fact. There is no sign that there was any Christian who did not hold it.

Then there is the late teaching of Palestine as exemplified in the Epistle of St. James, written shortly before the fall of Jerusalem. Typically Jewish in character, not, indeed, actually mentioning the Resurrection, but apparently thinking it necessary to correct misunderstandings of St.

Paul's teachings about faith and works, but certainly not dissociating himself from his teaching that our Lord was risen.

Once more, there is the late teaching of Ephesus as shown in the works bearing the name of St. John. We need not go into the question whether the Apocalypse and the Gospel were both written by the Son of Zebedee, or if one, or both, must be ascribed to the elder John or some other writer. If they must it only gives us two more witnesses. There is the Apocalypse with its revelation from "one like unto a son of man," who declares (i. 10) himself as the Living One—"I was dead and behold I am alive for evermore"—and the central figure of the later imagery in the last part of the Lamb that was slain "to receive the power, and riches, and wisdom, and might, and honour, and glory, and blessing" (v. 12). And there is the Gospel, written later to people who knew at least the contents of the other Gospels, giving new facts, correcting misapprehensions, emphasising the historical character of the life of the Divine Word incarnate on earth, with its matter-of-fact details of the Resurrection and of the Risen Master.

Two more may be added. The Epistle to the Hebrews is not by St. Paul. The author declares that he had never seen Christ, while St. Paul based his claim to be called an apostle on the fact that he had. It has been suggested that he was a Jew who wrote for his fellow Christians in the country districts of Palestine. We cannot tell. And, finally, the last ten verses of St. Mark's Gospel are by another hand. The story leaves off suddenly at v. 8, "for they were afraid," and begins to tell the story afresh. The last part seems to have been torn, or worn, off before

St. Luke and St. Matthew used it as the basis of their fuller stories. If so, we have here yet another witness, though possibly only one making a summary from the third and fourth Gospels. The name of Aristion has been suggested as that of the author.

The number of witnesses from different groups may be said to be ample.

"Yes," people say, "but there are discrepancies in the accounts. They don't agree." That shows that they are independent. They didn't compare notes and agree all to say the same thing. When a piece of news is told us in the various papers, each in its own way, we are inclined to credit it. If it appears in all in exactly the same words, we say, "That came from a press agency. It only represents one man's information." So, too, the identical answers in two boys' examination papers point to a single source: either one of the boys themselves from whom the other cribbed, or from some book of notes or notes of lessons. When witnesses say exactly the same thing, either in a detective story or in a court of law, you suspect collaboration. What you do look for is to see if the differences contradict one another. Long ago people objected to St. Augustine (A.D. 354-430) that there were discrepancies in the Gospels. "I wish," he replied:

"that one of those foolish people who found their captious objections to the Gospel on trifling difficulties of this kind would himself tell a story twice over, honestly endeavouring to give a true account of what happened, and that his words should be taken down and read over to him. We should see whether he would not say more at one time than another; and whether the order would not be changed, not only of words but of things;

and whether he would not put some opinion of his own into the mouth of another, because, though he had never heard him say it, he knew it perfectly well to be in his mind; and whether he would not sometimes express in a few words what he had before narrated at length."⁸

Or to come to modern times, Mr. Wilfrid Ward and Thomas Huxley both belonged to a society called the *Synthetic Society*, which was a good deal talked about. When the former

"showed Huxley various accounts he had received of the Synthetic Society, which being collated showed various discrepancies, 'Don't get any more,' he said, 'or the German critics will prove conclusively that it never existed.'"⁹

So it is immaterial whether at the empty tomb there were two angels or one, or first one and then

⁸ *Contr. Faust.*, xxxiii. 8, quoted in W. Montgomery's *St. Augustine* (Hodder and Stoughton, 1914), p. 195.

Cp. A. C. Headlam, *Christian Theology* (Oxford, 1934), p. 281: "Take for example the battle of Waterloo. If you read the many narratives of persons who were present at the battle you will find remarkable discrepancies between them. To take an instance. Not long ago there was a discussion in the papers on which of the days before Waterloo it was that the famous ball took place. Yet no one doubts the reality of the ball."

Cp. Sir Thomas Browne (*Christian Morals*, part ii., § 2): "Capital Truths are to be narrowly eyed, collateral lapses and circumstantial deliveries not to be too strictly sifted. And if the substantial subject be well forged out, we need not examine the sparks which irregularly fly from it."

⁹ M. Ward, *The Wilfrid Wards* (Sheed and Ward, 1934), vol. i., p. 347.

two, as it was whether the Prime Minister went to lay the foundation-stone in this or that kind of car, or had two servants or only one with him. The point is whether the differences involve any contradiction as to the event itself.¹⁰ Now the accounts of the Resurrection are declared to be mutually contradictory—that one says that the disciples first saw our Lord in Galilee, and others that it was in Jerusalem that He first appeared; that some say that the Ascension took place immediately after the Rising, and others that He ascended after forty days. And it must be acknowledged that at first sight they do seem not merely to be independent of, but incompatible with one another.

But a little more attention will show that the difficulty arises from the fact that the first three Gospels give very summary accounts. The events are, so to speak, "telescoped." They do not seem to try to give a full account except, perhaps, of the

¹⁰ Thus it has been objected that "St. Mark speaks of Salome as the third woman that came to the tomb, while St. Luke calls her Joanna." But the number was not limited to three. Indeed St. Luke speaks of the "other women." "Spices were bought," says St. Luke, on the Friday evening, while St. Mark says they bought them "when the Sabbath was past." But some may quite well have been bought at one time and more at another. Anyhow the spices were there. "St. Mark says they saw 'a young man at the tomb,' where St. Luke says that 'two men stood by them in dazzling apparel.'" But having seen one man does not prevent you, and still less others, from seeing two. "St. John only mentions Mary Magdalene as being at the tomb." But her words, "We know not where they have laid him," imply that she had companions.

events in the garden at the Tomb. Possibly this is because that had already been given to their readers in the oral instruction they had received as converts. St. Luke says that he wrote for Theophilus that he might know "the certainty concerning the things wherein he had been instructed." Possibly he had had a list of the witnesses such as St. Paul refers to in his letter to the Corinthians.

But when we come to fit the scattered details into a whole we find they fall into a scheme of three. There are:

- (1) Appearances at Jerusalem, to reassure individuals and to tell the disciples to go to Galilee.
- (2) Appearances in Galilee, where the disciples had gathered for teaching and intercourse sustained over forty days.
- (3) A final appearance and commission to preach and baptise, near Jerusalem, followed by the Ascension.¹¹

¹¹ Cp. F. Godet, *Lectures in Defence of the Christian Faith*, tr. W. H. Lyttelton (T. and T. Clark, 2nd ed., 1883), p. 16: "It is, on the other hand, very easy to combine the narratives of all these various appearances distributed among the Gospels into a complete and consistent picture . . . we perceive that Jesus began by acts of which the object was to administer comfort and reassurance. . . . When the flock had been reconstituted in its completeness, He sent them back to Galilee, where He had already appointed to meet them. . . . Lastly, He brings them back to Jerusalem, where they are to await His return in the Spirit at Pentecost; and in a final appearance He bids them adieu.

"On looking back upon the whole, we easily per-

Now, though on putting them together we find they fall into this very natural and reasonable course, we find no hint or consciousness of it in the records. It is almost impossible to believe that a confused mass of inventions or mistakes in different authors, could have combined to make a coherent whole with only quite insignificant discrepancies. A jig-saw puzzle will only fit together and make a picture (even if one or two pieces get lost) if the picture was there before the wood was sawn up.

And though there are differences, even discrepancies if you will, the agreements far outnumber them. First of all:

(I) *As to the fact itself.* There is no counter-tradition. That is, in the Christian community. The Jews declared that the disciples had come by night and stolen the Body, which is at least evidence for the Empty Tomb. If the whole story was based on hallucination or fraud, there would surely have been some counter-tradition. We cannot, of course, prove that there was none, but there is no sign of it anywhere.

ceive how wonderfully the several fragments of the picture fit into each other. But the records themselves give not the slightest hint respecting this mutual inter-connexion and this natural progress of the advancing steps of the story."

Cp. R. Whately, *Elements of Rhetoric* (Longmans, 1866), p. 40: "*Undesigned* testimony is manifestly, so far, the stronger; the suspicion of fabrication being thus precluded. Slight incidental hints, therefore, and oblique allusions to any fact, have often much more weight than distinct formal assertions of it. And, moreover, such allusions will often go to indicate not only that the fact is *true*, but that it was, at the time when so alluded to, *notorious* and undisputed."

(2) *There is no description of the fact itself as seen by an eye-witness.* At most there is a statement about an earthquake and the descent of an angel of the Lord whose appearance was like lightning, which may be based on something the soldiers said. But when people began to invent, as they did in the second century, they wrote descriptions like that in the apocryphal Gospel of St. Peter, in which all sorts of details are given. Could a forger have resisted the temptation to do the same a century before? Would he not have been almost certain to have added "corroborative details" of this sort?

(3) *Again, the manifestations are to believers.* At first sight this seems to have been invariably the case. True, St. Thomas is represented as holding out till he had seen the Risen Christ, but even he was already a disciple. Could a forger have resisted the temptation to tell of striking conversions of unbelievers? St. Paul's dramatic conversion is set in a chain of historical events, and we may see how that was prepared for. There is no suggestion that it was merely an edifying fable. And the matter was there, if they had wished to embroider it. St. James, the Lord's brother, did not believe in Him before the Resurrection. Afterwards we find him with the believers. We learn the reason of this almost by accident from St. Paul's incidental inclusion of his name in his list. But there is no account of his conversion by seeing the Risen Christ, such as a forger would have delighted to tell.¹²

¹² As did the writer of the *Gospel to the Hebrews*, probably written about A.D. 150. He gives an account of the appearance to St. James, of no value historically but pointing to an ancient tradition and possibly

(4) *The appearances were, from the first, not merely to individuals, such as Mary Magdalene and St. Peter, but to companies.* All the accounts agree in this.

(5) *The Risen Lord showed Himself as He chose*—visible when He chose, disappearing when He chose. He could use His body, forbid Mary Magdalene to cling to it, walk with it with the disciples to Emmaus, offer it to St. Thomas to investigate, eat with it of the broiled fish to reassure the disciples, but it was also able to pass through closed doors, to do without food; it was absolutely under the control of His will. We have stories of people returning to life in the body. We have stories of the appearances of spirits. But here is a quite original form of resurrection found in no legend before or since. A man of genius, of course, could have invented it, but all the witnesses agree in the picture.¹³

based on 1 Cor. xv. Cp. E. G. Selwyn, in *A New Commentary on Holy Scripture*, ed. C. Gore (S.P.C.K., 1928), "The Evidence of the Resurrection," New Testament, p. 303: "The *Gospel of the Hebrews*, amid much that is legendary, contained, according to a quotation of St. Jerome, an account of an appearance of Jesus to James. The characterisation of James in this fragment is more true to what we know of him from Acts than one would expect, if the fragments were simply a haggadic amplification of St. Paul's statement that the Lord appeared to James; while the allusion to the breaking of bread (without mention of a cup) recalls the scene at Emmaus. Was James possibly the unnamed companion of Cleopas?" The whole article should be read.

¹³ Cp. C. Gore, *The Reconstruction of Belief*, vol. i.; *Belief in God* (Murray, new edition in one volume,

(6) *The appearances were not believed in at first* in many cases. The women's account seems to be "idle tales." "Certain women made us astonished." "Some doubted," at first, that is, for we do not hear of any doubt maintaining itself. St. Thomas refused to believe, though ten men whom he knew and trusted assured him that He was risen. He would only be convinced by sight. All the accounts agree that the Resurrection was not expected.

(7) *Finally, no mere report was accepted* with, perhaps, the single exception that the ten disciples believed St. Peter's word—"The Lord is risen indeed and hath appeared unto Simon." And

1926), ch. xi., "The Historical Evidence," p. 269: "His condition is one of which hitherto men had never had experience. His spiritual body was material indeed, but it was one in which matter was wholly subservient to spiritual purpose, and no longer an impediment or restraint. To me it appears incredible that the evangelists could have derived from any other source than the actual experiences of the first disciples the subtle details which suggest the complex picture of the 'spiritual body' of Jesus after the Resurrection."

Cp. H. M. Gwatkin, *The Knowledge of God* (T. and T. Clark, 1907), vol. i., p. 188: "The highest embodiment that we can imagine for him (man) is rightly described by St. Paul as a spiritual body (*soma pneumaticon*), meaning not a body made of spirit, if such be thinkable, but a body in which spirit has complete control of matter. And it must be within God's power to evolve such a body; for, as Lotze has shown, we are not to conceive of God as so strong that he can overcome the utmost resistance of matter, but as so related to matter that it cannot resist him at all."

later on they showed that they knew the value of testimony. Matthias was chosen among those who had seen the Risen Christ to be an apostle and witness. The word "witness" appears and reappears in the first chapters of the Acts. "We are witnesses of these things." St. Paul claims to be an apostle just as much as they were because his vision was as real as theirs. "Am I not an apostle? Have I not seen the Lord?"¹⁴

¹⁴ These seven agreements are taken from Westcott's *Commentary on St. John*, reprinted from *The Speaker's Commentary* (Murray, 1887), p. 287, who adds: "The revelation issued in a conviction of the presence of the Living Lord with the disciples."

There is agreement also as to several characteristic circumstances.

"The visit of the women to the sepulchre in the early morning was the starting-point of hope."

"The removal of the stone first raised questionings."

"The revelations of angels preceded the manifestation of the Lord Himself."

"The Lord revealed Himself to Mary Magdalene first."

He also suggests the following "provisional arrangement of the facts":

Just before 6 p.m. Saturday. Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of James go to view the sepulchre (Matt. xxviii. 1).

After 6 p.m. Saturday. The purchase of spices by Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James and Salome (Mark xvi. 1).

Very early on Sunday. The Resurrection followed by the earthquake, the descent of the angel, the opening of the tomb (Matt. xxviii. 2-4).

5 a.m. Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James and Salome, probably without others, start for the sepulchre in the twilight. Mary Magdalene goes

I think we may say that the witnesses were sufficient.

before the others, and returns at once to Peter and John (John xx. 1 ff.).

5.30 *a.m.* Her companions reach the sepulchre when the sun had risen (Mark xvi. 2). A vision of an angel. Message to the disciples (Matt. xxviii. 5; Mark xvi. 5 ff.).

6 *a.m.* Another party, among whom is Joanna, come a little later, but still in the early morning (Luke xxiv. 1 ff.). Cp. Mark xvi. 1. A vision of "two young men." Words of comfort and instruction (Luke xxiv. 4 ff.).

6.30 *a.m.* The visit of Peter and John (John xx. 3-10). A vision of two angels to Mary Magdalene (John xx. 11-13). About the same time the company of women carry their tidings to the apostles (Luke xxiv. 10 ff.).

7 *a.m.* The Lord reveals Himself to Mary Magdalene (John xx. 14-18; Mark xvi. 9 f.). Not long after He reveals Himself, as it appears, to the company of women who are returning to the sepulchre. Charge to the brethren to go to Galilee (Matt. xxviii. 9 f.).

4-6 *p.m.* The appearance to the two disciples on the way to Emmaus (Luke xxiv. 13 ff.; Mark xvi. 12).

After 4 *p.m.* An appearance to Peter (Luke xxiv. 34; comp. 1 Cor. xv. 5).

8 *p.m.* The appearance to the eleven and others (Luke xxiv. 36 f.; Mark xvi. 14; John xx. 19 ff.).

The main difficulties are due to the extreme compression of St. Matthew's narrative, in which there is no clear distinction of points of time. The incidents and the spectators are brought together in a general picture.

III

Were they trustworthy? "They were mere ignorant fisher folk."

Perhaps, but we must not confuse ignorance and dishonesty. It was not explanation that was wanted but fact. Very probably they could not have given any *theory* of the Resurrection. It is doubtful whether at first they realised all that was involved. As Huxley once said, they would certainly not have understood the Nicene Creed. Very probably the Apostles' Creed would have caused his "recalcitrant commotion" if it had been propounded to them. Though, after all, they were not so ignorant as all that. Zebedee was an employer of labour and had "hired servants." St. John was known to the High Priest at Jerusalem. But it was not a question of cleverness but of honesty. No lack of education need make a man tell a lie. When they said they had seen Him they meant they had seen Him. If there is any difference between an educated and a simple man's evidence it is that a simple man would speak more straightforwardly. He would not be likely to use symbolic or poetical language that might be misunderstood. And, as we saw, they all knew the value of witness.¹⁵

They believed on Him before." This, we saw, is not absolutely true. St. James, His brother—possibly an elder half-brother, a son of Joseph

¹⁵ Cp. R. Whately, *Elements of Rhetoric*, part i., ch. ii., § 4 (Longmans, 1866), p. 39: "When the question is as to a Fact, it is plain we have to look chiefly to the *honesty* of a witness, his accuracy, and his means of gaining information. When the question is about a matter of Opinion, it is equally plain that his *ability to form a judgement* is no less to be taken into account."

by a former marriage, as he seems to have taken on himself to tell Him what to do¹⁶—did not believe on Him. St. Paul was an active persecutor of the Christians—of Christ Himself, he considered. It requires a good deal to change men like that. Still, though they, most of them, believed in Him before, none of them expected Him to rise from the dead. The women prepared spices to anoint His body. They wondered who would roll away the stone. Their words to the disciples “made them astonished.” They seemed to them as idle tales. Mary Magdalene, so far from fancying she saw Him in the dim twilight (it would have been broad daylight when she got to the Tomb), thought He was the gardener. “Sir, if thou hast borne Him hence.” The two disciples going to Emmaus “hoped it was he which should redeem Israel.” Thomas refused to believe though he knew and loved his fellow disciples. Even towards the end “some doubted.” And they all lived in a sceptical age. All were

In 1727-29, Thomas Woolston published his *Six Discourses on the Miracles*, striving to show that they had no historical basis, but that their value was wholly spiritual. In 1729, Thomas Sherlock “published a still more famous and original work entitled *The Tryal of the Witnesses of the Resurrection of Jesus Christ*, which ends thus:

“*Judge.* What say you (Gentlemen of the Jury)? Are the Apostles guilty of false evidence in the case of the Resurrection of Jesus or not guilty?

Foreman. Not guilty.

Judge. Very well; and now, gentlemen, I resign my commission, and am your humble servant.”

Cp. J. H. Overton and F. Relton, *The English Church from the Accession of George I. to the end of the Eighteenth Century* (Macmillan, 1906), pp. 50-1.

¹⁶ John vii. 3.

familiar with the Sadducees, who believed neither in the Resurrection, nor angel, nor spirit.

"*They were interested parties. They had something to gain.*" Yes, threats, scourgings, imprisonments, exile, persecution, and death. Not a very great inducement, one would think, to say that they had seen Him alive if they had not.¹⁷

We may take it that the witnesses were trustworthy.

¹⁷ H. Latham, *Pastor Pastorum* (Cambridge, 1890), ch. xiii., "The Lessons of the Resurrection," p. 442: "It is a striking feature in the change worked in the Apostles, that, after the Resurrection, all thoughts of self disappeared. The Apostles, as the History shows us, had been originally no less prone to wrangle as to 'which should be the greatest' than the average of men. We find in the Gospel the self-regard that we might naturally expect; sometimes it is of a healthy sort, as when Peter says, 'we have left all and followed thee'; and sometimes it is unhealthy, like that soreness on points of precedence, which we mark even just before the Last Supper; but in the Acts we find among the Apostles no trace of self-regard at all."

Cp. Bp. Butler, *Analogy*, part ii., ch. vii, § 12: "A person's laying down his life in attestation of facts or of opinions is the strongest proof of his believing them. And if the Apostles and their contemporaries did believe the facts, in attestation of which they exposed themselves to sufferings and death; then their belief, or rather knowledge, must be a proof of those facts; for they were such as came under the observation of their senses." So Tertullian attributed his own conversion to the example of the martyrs of his day, for as he said, *Nemo voluisset occidi nisi compos veritatis*—"No one would have wished to be killed unless in possession of the truth" (*Contr. Gnost. Scorp.*, viii.).

IV

"What signs were there before, at the time, and after?" We saw that was our third question. Was there anything like the notices in the Press, the cheering in the streets, and the rising of the building in the case of the Prime Minister's coming to lay the foundation-stone?

For the first, there is the whole history of the Jews as told in the Old Testament. In former days people would have referred to prophecies. St. Peter quoted the words:

"Thou didst not leave my soul in hell. Neither didst thou suffer thy holy one to see corruption."

Men saw a parallel between Jonah in the whale and Christ in the grave. Handel took the words of Job and set them to music, expressing confidence in the Risen Christ. Everyone knows the soprano solo, "I know that my Redeemer liveth." But, as a matter of fact, these words had no reference to the Resurrection of Christ. When men knew that He was risen they struck them as being applicable. The words themselves would never have suggested the idea. It was the fact that suggested their application. There was no current belief that the Messiah was to die and rise again. The event could not have been invented to fulfil the prediction or to satisfy an expectation that was not there.¹⁸

¹⁸ R. Whately, *Elements of Rhetoric*, part i., ch. ii., § 4 (Longmans, 1866), p. 44: "Thus, as has been above remarked, when the disciples of Jesus record occurrences and discourses, such as were foreign to all the notions, and at variance with all the prejudices, of any man living in those days, and of Jews more especially, this is a strong confirmation of their testimony."

No! It is rather the whole sweep of God's guidance of the Jewish people that runs, more or less clearly, through every page of the Old Testament, the gradual spiritualising of their idea of Jehovah, the building-up of the expectation of the Messiah, the whole education of the law, that we now see was preparing the way for Christ. The Resurrection fits in with His life. It is the natural culmination of it, just as the life itself is the goal towards which the whole of the Old Testament was ever tending. It was leading up to it all along, but it could not have produced it as the popular expectation of the Messiah was of a quite different type.

What corresponds to the cheering of the crowd? What was the effect on those who saw which we can still hear ringing in the pages of the New Testament? Surely the change in the character of the apostles. Before they had seen the Risen Christ they were crushed, despondent, shattered, bewildered, the men meeting with closed doors "for fear of the Jews," the women thinking only of honouring the dead body with spices in the tomb. Afterwards they are entirely changed. They are ready to preach openly, to go into the Temple, to defy the authorities. "Whether it be right in the sight of God to hearken unto you rather than unto God, judge ye; for we cannot but speak the things which we saw and heard." Ready to disregard threats, to court imprisonment, to be scattered by persecution, to leave their homes and go to the Samaritans and the Gentiles, to break with their past, to adopt a new idea of the Messiah, to find Him in the Teacher they knew, and in this belief to face a long life of toil and labour, ready to die in a foreign land for their convictions.

So long ago, the great preacher of Constantinople, Chrysostom, said:

“Had Christ not really risen from the dead, how do we account for the fact that the apostles, who in their behaviour to Him living had shown such a weakness and cowardice that they deserted and betrayed Him, after His death showed such zeal that they laid down their lives for Him?”¹⁹

He was only saying what Paley said many years after:

“If twelve men, whose probity and good sense I had long known, should seriously and circumstantially relate to me an account of a miracle wrought before their eyes, and in which it was impossible that they should be deceived; if the governor of the country, hearing a rumour of this account, should call these men into his presence, and offer them a short proposal—either to confess the imposture, or submit to be tied up to a gibbet; if they should refuse with one voice to acknowledge that there existed any falsehood or imposture in the case; if this threat were communicated to them separately, yet with no different effect; if it was at last executed; if I myself saw them, one after another, consenting to be racked, burnt, or

¹⁹ In *St. Ignat.*, tom. ii., 599, quoted in J. B. Mozley's *Miracles*, p. 249, Notes to Lecture I., where many other passages from the Fathers are collected.

H. Latham, *Pastor Pastorum* (Cambridge, 1890), ch. xiii., “The Lessons of the Resurrection,” p. 443: “The story of the Apostles is unique in History in another way. No one of them endeavoured to draw a following about himself, or to claim succession to the Master's place. Little differences of view and little disagreements as to the course to be followed, now and then there were; if, indeed, our records did not speak of such we should suspect that something was kept back. We have cases enough of causes

strangled, rather than give up the truth of their accounts; still, if Mr. Hume's rule be my guide, I am not to believe them. Now I undertake to say there exists not a sceptic in the world who would not believe them, or who would defend such incredulity."²⁰

What corresponds to the rising of the building of which the Prime Minister came to lay the foundation-stone?

Surely, the building-up of the Church of which Jesus Christ is the head corner-stone. This is a fact of history. The Church is there. Christianity appeared in the world's history in the first century and the fact has to be accounted for. Whether you agree with its tenets or not it plainly created a moral revolution. Even if you think its influence was all for the bad, that it restrained and thwarted human nature when it preached self-restraint and purity of life, it certainly effected a great change, and great changes do not come of themselves. Such results need an adequate cause.²¹

passed on to a company of successors from the dying leader's hand, but in no instance, that I recollect, have these successors remained united as the Apostles did."

²⁰ *A View of the Evidences of Christianity* (Cambridge, 1850), "Preparatory Considerations," p. 6.

²¹ Cp. A. C. Headlam, *The Miracles of the New Testament* (Murray, 1915), p. 247: "I have referred in a previous lecture to criticisms which have attempted to estimate mathematically the evidence against a miracle. What are the mathematical chances against a coincidence that the women should think the tomb empty when it was not empty, and the Disciples should think they had seen the Risen Lord when they had not seen Him, and that these two blunders combined should produce the Christian Church?"

It is related somewhere of M. Talleyrand, the great renegade French bishop, that someone came to him once saying he was anxious to found a new religion. "My dear friend," he replied, "there is nothing easier. You have only to get yourself crucified and rise again the third day, and the thing is done." The Resurrection of Christ is no doubt a miracle, but if you deny it you have got to account for a still greater wonder, and an unreasonable one, namely, the conversion of the world without an adequate cause—a miracle without the Resurrection; the natural result if it really took place.

Or to take particular instances in the change. The Jews believed that the Sabbath rest on the seventh day was established by direct command of God. It is still held by Jews today who would not stand out for the story of the giving of the law on Mount Sinai as an essential of their religion, and is to them a common bond of nationality. As early as the year 54 we find Christians beginning to change the day from the seventh to the first of the week. At the end of the century we find from Pliny's letter that the change is established. If we tried to change our observance of Sunday to any other day of the week we could not do it. It needed a Revolution in France to attempt it and the attempt did not succeed. Even the relentless Revolution in Russia has, so far, not succeeded in doing it. The only power that has partially succeeded is Islam, a profound, if mistaken, religious force. How else are we to account for the observance of Sunday in the Christian world but as the recognition of the events of the first Easter Day?

Or consider the language of Christian devotion. From the first it centred in the Eucharist. What would be the meaning of breaking bread and drink-

ing wine in memory of a dead man? And we must remember that the Church grew up with its sacraments in conscious opposition and antagonism to Paganism with its mystery cults, out of Jewish soil with nothing to suggest a Real Presence except that of belief in the Resurrection of Christ.

V

The evidence, it may be claimed, is ample, varied, able to stand the test of criticism. All that is wanted is an understanding of what is good evidence, an open mind, a power of discerning and weighing spiritual issues as well as bare facts. We have, so far, only considered one side of the evidence, and that the weaker side. When we turn from the defence to criticise the theories of those who deny that our Lord rose, the task is easier. They are incredible in themselves and contradict one another. It will be our task to consider them in the next chapter. Meanwhile we may conclude with the words of Carlyle:

“ ‘ Is not a real Miracle simply a violation of the Laws of Nature ? ’ ask several. Whom I answer by a new question, ‘ What are the Laws of Nature ? To me perhaps the rising of one from the dead were no violation of those laws but a confirmation, were some far deeper Law now penetrated into, and by Spiritual Force, even as the rest have been, brought to bear on us with its Natural Force ’ ”²²

²² Carlyle, *Sartor Resartus*, bk. iii., ch. viii., “ Natural Supernaturalism.”

CHAPTER III

NON-CHRISTIAN THEORIES OF THE RESURRECTION OF CHRIST

“Certainly he was wise who declared: ‘Never pronounce until you have heard both sides of the story.’”—ARISTOPHANES (450-385 B.C.), *The Wasps*, 725.

“Qui statuit aliquid parte inaudita altera,
Aequum licet statuerit, haud aequus fuerit.”

(Whoever shall decide a question without hearing the other side, even though he decide justly, will not act with justice.) SENECA, *Medea*, 198.

It is difficult to believe that Christ rose from the dead, but it is far more difficult to believe that He did not. We have considered the evidence for the belief, we will now examine the non-Christian explanations as to how that belief arose.

No question is really settled till you have heard both sides. As long as the arguments against a case are ignored you have a lurking feeling of insecurity. You have heard what may be said for it, but you do not quite know what may be said against it, and you fear that the arguments on the other side may be stronger than you think. It was the method of Scholastic Philosophy to weigh the *pros* and *cons*. It is the method of English government to have an Opposition Party. It is true that there are some people like the judge who, it was said, refused to hear the case for the defence, and said: “The learned counsel for the prosecution has made it all beauti-

fully clear, and we can't have someone coming in and making it all confused again."¹ But the majority of men feel that it is only fair to hear both sides before giving a judgment.

Again, things are sometimes difficult to prove. Especially is this true in matters of history. You cannot get back into the past and question the witnesses, or get new facts not recorded. "There is no demonstrative evidence in historical problems."² "In the realm of the unverifiable there are no sufficient historical police."³ Students know well that as "probability is the very guide

¹ W. Temple, *Essays in Christian Politics* (Longmans, 1927), p. 82: "For it must be insisted that the method of excluding from the evidence of religion all that is derived from religion, can only be admitted as strictly provisional. If it is really followed we have a repetition of the absurdity of the Dutch judge in the legend, who is reported to have given sentence as soon as the case for the plaintiff was ended. When told he must hear the arguments on the other side, he said: 'That would be ridiculous. Now it is all clear as daylight; but if I let the other people begin it will be all confused again.'"

² A. C. Headlam, *Christian Theology* (Oxford, 1934), p. 252. He continues: "What I think there can be little doubt about is that from the beginning and in the lifetime of Jesus Himself He was believed to have worked miracles, and that it is not possible to construct a life of Him in a scientific way which leaves out miracles."

³ J. B. Lightfoot, *Essays on the Work entitled "Supernatural Religion"* (1889), ch. ii., "The Silence of Eusebius" (1875), p. 86: "In the land of the unverifiable there are no efficient police. When a writer expatiates amidst conjectural quotations from conjectural apocryphal gospels, he is beyond the reach of refutation."

of life,"⁴ so it is the deciding factor in history. But when the alternative to a strong probability is a far greater improbability, that strong probability becomes practical certainty.

For instance, it is difficult to believe that the world was created, but it is far more difficult to maintain that it is self-existent. It is difficult to believe in the existence of God, but it is far more irrational to hold that He does not exist.⁵ So the evidence for the Resurrection of Christ may not be such as would be "enough to hang a man" if taken by itself, but it is far more difficult to believe that He did not rise when we have to consider the various improbabilities and mutually contradictory explanations of the belief given by those who deny the fact on the ground that "miracles do not happen."

⁴ Bp. Butler, *Analogy*, Introduction, § 3. Cp. Bp. Berkeley, *Alciphron*, Dialogue VI., *Works* (Oxford, 1871), p. 284: "Knowledge, I grant, in a strict sense cannot be had without evidence or demonstration: but probable arguments are a sufficient ground of faith."

⁵ Cp. Pascal, *Pensées*, ed. Brunschvicg, 230: "Incompréhensible que Dieu soit, et incompréhensible qu'il ne soit pas; que l'âme soit avec le corps, que nous n'ayons pas d'âme; que le monde soit créé, et qu'il ne soit pas," etc. (It is incomprehensible that God should exist, and it is incomprehensible that He should not exist; that the soul should be joined to the body and that we should have no soul; that the world should be created, and that it should not be created, etc.) Cp. J. Chevalier, *Pascal*, tr. L. A. Clare (Sheed and Ward, 1933), p. 178: "As a matter of fact, these two 'incomprehensibles' are not of the same order, nor have they the same value. The first depends upon our reason, or, more correctly, our *logic*; the second depends upon facts."

We have examined, in the previous lecture, the positive evidence. We found that the witnesses were enough, varied, and trustworthy, and that what they said is corroborated by what went before, by what happened at the time, and by what came after. It is always the weaker position to be on the defence. We will now carry the war into the enemy's camp, and criticise the various counter-theories of the critics of Christianity.

I

But first of all let us consider the objection that is often made: "*It was so long ago.*" This, of course, is not an argument but an evasion. It is an equivalent to a general disbelief in history. Spinoza declared that "the truth of an historical narrative, however assured, cannot give us knowledge, nor consequently the love of God."⁶ Lessing declared that "contingent truths of history can never prove eternal truths of reason,"⁷ but that

⁶ *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*, ch. iv. He continues: "For love of God springs from knowledge of Him, and knowledge of Him should be derived from general ideas in themselves certain, so that the truth of an historical narrative is very far from being a necessary requisite for attaining our highest good."

⁷ *Theologische Streitschriften Ueber den Beweis des Geistes und der Kraft*, Werke (Stuttgart, G. J. Goschen'sche Verlagshandlung, 1890), Bd. XI., s. 136: "Zufällige Geschichtswahrheiten können der Beweis von notwendigen Vernunftwahrheiten nie werden." Adding: "Das ist der garstige breite Graben über den ich nicht kommen kann, so oft und ernstlich ich auch den Sprung versucht habe." (That is the ugly wide ditch over which I cannot get, oft and earnestly as I have tried the jump.)

was because they thought, as rationalists, that reason was enough by itself. Most of us, however, think that a reasonable belief is all the stronger for being based on things that really took place. But when people say "It was so long ago," and "Do you want to pin us down to history? Do you want us to believe on the strength of something that happened nearly two thousand years ago?"⁸ it is not rationalistic theory that makes them say it, but the fact that they are only imperfectly educated and have very little knowledge of what history is. Sometimes it is simply that "they can't be bothered."

For proof depends on evidence, not on time. The only difference that comes with the passing of time is when actual eye-witnesses die and can no longer be appealed to. Then, of course, it becomes weaker as we cannot add to the evidence which they have recorded. If the records get lost, of course that makes it weaker still, but that is due to the loss, not to time. Time may make it stronger again by finding them once more. The evidence for Christianity was no stronger a hundred years ago than it is now. It will be no weaker a hundred years hence. "Root out once for all from your mind," wrote Professor Gwatkin:

⁸ It may also, of course, be that their conception of Christ is that of a teacher in the past who died as other teachers have died. To the Christian who believes in His resurrection, He is still living and working in the world. He would never ask in the fashion dear to some journalists, "If Christ came to London, what would He do?" because he believes that He is already here in our midst. The sacraments of the Church make real to us the Life lived years ago in Palestine.

"any lurking idea that historical evidence is made uncertain by lapse of time. There is a change when the document is no longer backed up by living memory; but after that there is little further change. If writings are lost or mutilated, whatever remains, remains exactly what it was at first. . . . It is utter fallacy to imagine, as many do, that history steadily becomes more uncertain as we trace it backwards into what are metaphorically called the mists of antiquity."⁹

A certain mathematical theologian named John Craig, who lived in the year 1699, tried to prove that the evidence for Christianity, though quite good presumably when the New Testament was written, had become much weaker in his day, but would become false or at least "reduced to zero in A.D. 3150."¹⁰ But even on this reckoning it will still be more than half true for another five hundred years at least.

If anything, evidence grows stronger with time by being put to the test of time. Authorities become more accessible. Bibles are printed and become cheap. The records are put to the test of criticism. If their authenticity is false the falsehoods are detected. Legends grow up, but

⁹ *The Knowledge of God* (T. and T. Clark, 1907), vol. i., p. 192.

¹⁰ Quoted in a note on p. 286 to the passage quoted above (p. 71) from Berkeley's *Alciphron*.

Cp. Hume, *Treatise of Human Nature*, Bk. I., pt. iii., section 13; Dent's Everyman's Library, vol. i., p. 145: "It seems contrary to common sense even to think that if the republic of letters and art of printing continue upon the same footing as at present, our posterity, even after a thousand ages, can ever doubt if there has been such a man as Julius Cæsar."

with time are disproved.¹¹ Those which stand the test stand firmer for having been tried. Lost evidence is recovered. Documents like the *Codex Sinaiticus*, the *Chester Beatty Papyri*,¹² and the fragment in the Rylands Library at Manchester¹³ are discovered. The works of early writers which

¹¹ Thus the *Eikon Basilike* was generally believed to be by Charles I. in the days immediately succeeding his death, but lapse of time has established the probability that its author was John Gauden.

¹² *Fragments of an Unknown Gospel and Other Early Christian Papyri*, ed. H. Idris Bell and T. C. Skeat; published by the Trustees of the British Museum, 1935. The date of the unknown Gospel is about the middle of the second century. The fragment of a Gospel Commentary from the early part of the third century.

¹³ *An Unpublished Fragment of the Fourth Gospel in the John Rylands Library*, ed. by C. H. Roberts (Manchester University Press, 1935), p. 12: "If the argument of the present article is correct it is the earliest-known fragment of any part of the New Testament, and probably the earliest witness to the existence of the gospel according to St. John." And p. 16: "We may accept with some confidence the first half of the second century as the period in which P. Ryl. Gk. 457 was most probably written—a judgment I should be much more loath to pronounce were it not supported by Sir Frederic Kenyon, Dr. W. Schubart, and Dr. H. I. Bell, who have seen photographs of the text and whose experience and authority in these matters are unrivalled." It was common for the German critics of the middle of the last century; and is still for modern writers for the Rationalist Press Association, to attribute the composition of the Fourth Gospel to a date some years after this fragment was copied.

quote the Gospels are discovered.¹⁴ Books like the Ignatian epistles are finally proved genuine.¹⁵ Inscriptions corroborating the New Testament narratives, such as those found by Professor Ramsay in Asia Minor, are transcribed.¹⁶ People in general have little idea of the documentary strength of the New Testament books as compared with those of classical writers whose genuineness nobody doubts.¹⁷

"But," people say, "is it not a fact that legends grow round all the great figures of history? How do we know that the story of the Resurrection is not a myth?" But, surely, because some stories of the past are untrue that does not mean that all are. Each must be judged by its own evidence, not by the evidence of something else. As Professor

¹⁴ As, for instance, the *Diatessaron* or *Harmony of the Four Gospels* made about the year 170, discovered in the year 1876 in an Armenian translation of a Syriac commentary in the library of the Armenian convent near Venice.

¹⁵ Ignatius was a bishop of Antioch who in the year 111 was taken through Asia Minor to Rome to be martyred there. On his way he wrote seven letters to different churches, which have been preserved. There are six others which are spurious and were written probably in the fifth century. The genuineness of the whole thirteen was long disputed, but the question may be said to have been finally settled by Bp. Lightfoot in his *The Apostolic Fathers*, part ii., 1885-89.

¹⁶ See his *St. Paul, The Traveller and the Roman Citizen, Luke the Physician*, and other works.

¹⁷ I have tried to put this evidence in a simple form in my *The Case for Christianity* (Allen and Unwin, 1928), pp. 71-3, and in my *Question Time in Hyde Park*, pp. 150-1, 158-60.

Gwatkin says: "If many charters have been forged, can we have no certainty about the Great Charter of King John?"¹⁸ And must we scrap all our parliamentary institutions based upon it? Legends have grown round the person of St. Francis. We can trace the growth of them from the early contemporary accounts of Brother Elias in the *Speculum Perfectionis*, on to the popular stories of the *Little Flowers*. In just the same way legendary accounts of Christ were written in the second century.¹⁹ We can, by comparing them

¹⁸ *The Knowledge of God* (T. and T. Clark, 1907), vol. i., p. 189. The whole passage runs: "A general objection sometimes made is that if many stories of miracle are confessedly false, there can be no certainty about others. This is the ground recently taken by an eminent student, of whom I wish to say nothing that is not respectful. But I cannot reconcile this argument with the first rule of investigation, that everything is to be judged by its own evidence and not by the evidence of something else. If many charters have been forged, have we no certainty about the Great Charter of King John?"

Cp. Bp. Butler, *Analogy*, part ii., ch. vii., § 16: "To argue, that because there is, if there were, like evidence from testimony, for miracles acknowledged false, as for those in attestation of Christianity, therefore the evidence in the latter case is not to be credited; this is the same as to argue that if two men of equally good reputation had given evidence in different cases no way connected, and one of them had been convicted of perjury, this confuted the testimony of the other."

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, § 17: "It can never be sufficient to overthrow direct historical evidence, indolently to say, that there are so many principles, from whence men are liable to be deceived themselves, and disposed to deceive others, that one knows not what to believe."

with the genuine Gospels, easily see what is based on a true tradition and what is fiction.²⁰

Similarly, there are many myths about Pagan gods. There are myths about Mithra and Krishna. There are stories of saviour gods dying and rising again, which have their origin in nature cults connected with the coming of spring. But in these no stress is laid upon their historical nature. They often contradict one another. The Evangelists as Jews, even if they knew about them, would have regarded them with horror, and were not in the least likely to borrow from them. There is no trace of any connection with such stories in the New Testament. The ideas of God and of religion involved in them are entirely different. The similarities are superficial and are confined to a very few points. On a closer examination they disappear altogether, and we see they could never have suggested the trial and death of Christ with its matter-of-fact historical details fitting in with the known history of the period.²¹ It is not without significance that the

²⁰ These apocryphal Gospels can be best read in the edition by M. R. James, *The Apocryphal New Testament* (Oxford, 1894).

²¹ Cp. C. Gore, *The Reconstruction of Belief*, Bk. III.; *The Holy Spirit and the Church*, ch. iii., "Christianity and the Mystery Religions" (Murray, new edition in one volume, 1926), pp. 704-5: "Nor do the anthropomorphic legends of Osiris and the rest suggest the conception of resurrection as the Christians understood it. Some of these wholly mythical hero-gods were returned from the world of the dead by the decree of Zeus for part of the year, like Adonis and Persephone; and the fragments of the murdered and dismembered Osiris, re-collected by the loving search of Isis, were re-made into an Osiris who became the Lord of the

earliest creed declared that Christ suffered "under Pontius Pilate." No one with any real knowledge of Comparative Religion or of New Testament scholarship could ever suggest that this was the origin of the belief in the Resurrection of Christ.²² As Professor Tylor pointed out, anything can be interpreted as a nature myth—Julius Cæsar, Cortes, even the nursery rhyme *Sing a Song of Sixpence*,

dead. The Christian word 'resurrection,' with its very concrete associations, can hardly be properly applied to such vaguely conceived returns of souls from the world of the dead, or glorifications of a dead hero in Hades." He goes on to show how entirely different were the "Saviour gods" and "sacraments" which are adduced as parallels.

²² For example, Sir James Frazer, in his *Adonis, Attis, and Osiris* (Macmillan, 1906), p. 263, writes of Osiris: "The essence of both festivals was a dramatic representation of the death and resurrection of the god."

This suggests a comparison with the Eucharist as the memorial of the death and resurrection of Christ, till we read further and find: "In both of them Isis was figured by a gilt cow, and Osiris by an image moulded of moist vegetable earth"; and ch. v., *The Nature of Osiris*, § 1, "Osiris a corn god," p. 268: "An effigy of the corn god, moulded of earth and corn, was buried with funeral rites in the ground in order that, dying there, he might come to life again with the new crops. The ceremony was, in fact, a charm to ensure the growth of the corn by sympathetic magic."

A writer in a popular publication of the Rationalist Press Association finds in the "fact that the new religion so closely resembled" the religion of Osiris, "one of the main factors in the growth of Christianity."

if you do not demand "some more stringent criticism than mere resemblance."²³

II

To come to serious considerations of the problem. If the belief in the Resurrection is false, how did the idea arise?

"*It was a spiritual Resurrection.* For St. Paul said, 'if ye then be risen with Christ, seek those things that are above.' The disciples had not died and risen again. St. Paul and others (it is argued) used language like this, merely meaning, 'if you have accepted Christ's higher teaching, be consistent in leading a higher life,' and so the legend of Christ's actual Resurrection grew up. Spiritually it was true that He had risen again in

²³ *Primitive Culture* (Murray, 1871), vol. i., p. 287. The passage is quoted in full in *Question Time in Hyde Park*, p. 139. It continues: "Or if historical characters be selected with any discretion, it is easy to point out the solar episodes embodied in their lives. . . . The life of Julius Cæsar would fit as plausibly into a scheme of solar myth; his splendid course as in each new land he came, and saw, and conquered; his desertion of Cleopatra; his ordinance of the solar year for men; his death at the hand of Brutus, like Sîfrit's at the hand of Hagen in the "*Nibelungenlied*"; his falling pierced with many bleeding wounds and shrouding himself in his cloak to die in the darkness. Of Cæsar, better than of Cassius his slayer, it might have been said in the language of sun-myth:

O setting sun,
As in thy red rays thou dost sink to-night,
So in his red blood Cassius' day is set.
The sun of Rome is set."

the hearts of His followers, though the Resurrection was not an actual fact."

It is quite true that here St. Paul is using a simile, and the other Apostles use such language also. But a simile is only true if the archetype is a fact. You can talk in a figurative sense of rising with the lark, though you have no wings and do not twitter as you get out of bed. But this is only possible because there is such a bird as a lark that does rise, and rises early in the morning. No one would speak of rising with the owl, because it goes to roost with daylight, and no amount of poetical imagery would create a belief that it rose at daybreak.²⁴

Again, it is true that you can speak of Socrates as living again in the writings of Plato, but no one would ever base a theory of his personal immortality, still less of his residence in a book, on such metaphorical language. There is no stress on the words "living again." It would not make anyone believe that the tomb of Socrates was empty. So, to attribute the belief in the Resurrection of Christ to "the conviction that His teaching could not die" is incredible. People do not confuse a man's teaching with his self. The Apostles were simple, straightforward men, who would not be likely to talk in such fantastic phrases. St. Paul did not. Even if it be argued

²⁴ Cp. Bp. Berkeley, *Alciphron*, Dialogue VI., *Works* (Oxford, 1871), p. 285: "I must needs own I admit an allegorical resurrection that proves the real—to wit, a resurrection of Christ's disciples from weakness to resolution, from fear to courage, from despair to hope, of which, for aught I can see, no rational account can be given, but the sensible evidence that our Lord was truly, really, and literally risen from the dead."

that St. John might have done so, his words were taken literally, and if he did not undeceive his hearers, this theory resolves itself into:

III

The Theory of Fraud. This was the explanation of the Jews. The chief priests said to the soldiers: "Say ye, His disciples came by night and stole him away while we slept," and this explanation has been revived from time to time since. Renan speaks of "those who knew the secret of the disappearance of the Body," but such a phrase implies that they connived at what they knew to be untrue.²⁵ The statement seems to have gained little credence at the time and may be said to have been practically abandoned, at any rate as a reasoned belief.

Our judgment upon it depends on our opinion of the disciples. Did they lie deliberately? Read a few lines of any of their writings. Exercise your judgment about the character of any of the Apostles. Was it likely that St. Paul could have written as he did and all the time have been a deliberate impostor? Does it seem probable that

²⁵ *Les Apôtres*, p. 16: "Si toute la petite église eut été réunie la création légendaire eût été impossible; ceux qui savaient le secret de la disparition du corps eussent probablement réclamé contre l'erreur." ("If all the little Church had been reunited the creation of the legend would have been impossible; those who knew the secret of the disappearance of the body would probably have protested against the mistake.") Even so he is not sure, and says *probably*, for on his explanation the scruples must have vanished as none of them protested later, though they must have had ample opportunity to do so.

the first Christians who have given us our knowledge of the words and deeds of Christ were common liars? Is it conceivable that if they were they would have impressed their hearers, we will not say as saints, but as, at least, men of common honesty?

And notice well, it was not the fraud of one or two that is assumed. There are black sheep in every fold. Among a large body of people there might be found one or two who would even face death in upholding what they know to be false. There have been men who have lied in what they believed to be a good cause. But the theory demands not just the conscious deceit of a few abnormal men justifying the means by the ends. It implies the fraud of all, a fraud deliberate and concerted, sustained through years. We are asked to believe that there was not one single honest man among all the Apostles brave enough to "give the show away," as we should say. Not one among those who faced persecution and death courageous enough to tell the truth. Put so, we may say, no one really believes this explanation.²⁶

²⁶ So in the opinion of a learned Jew, J. Klausner, *Jesus of Nazareth, His Life, Times and Teaching*, tr. H. Danby (Allen and Unwin, 1929), p. 357: "That is impossible: *deliberate imposture* is not the substance out of which the religion of millions of mankind is created." But he continues: "We must assume that the owner of the tomb, Joseph of Arimathea, thought it unfitting that one who had been crucified should remain in his own ancestral tomb." He "therefore secretly removed the body at the close of Sabbath and buried it in an unknown grave." But this is only shifting the deceit on to the shoulders of Joseph of Arimathea. Of the

IV

Another theory that has been put forward is that *Christ was not really dead*, for, its advocates point out, Pilate "marvelled if He were already dead."

This theory seems to have been put forward by Paulus and the German rationalists of the eighteenth century.²⁷ They accepted the historical value of the Gospels but, on their assumption that miracles were "violations of the laws of Nature," they had to explain the Resurrection away. They suggested that Christ had swooned upon the Cross and had been laid in the tomb apparently dead, that during the night he had revived, had come out of the tomb, and that this had given rise to the belief that He had risen from the dead.

Now it is true that people have been known to revive after crucifixion. Josephus tells a story of such a resurrection in his *Life*. "When I was sent," he writes:

"by Titus Cæsar with Cerealis, and a thousand horsemen, to a certain village called Thecoa, in

appearances of the Risen Christ in Galilee he writes, p. 359: "Here again it is impossible to suppose that there was any conscious deception; the nineteen hundred years' faith of millions is not founded on deception."

²⁷ Cp. J. Klausner, *ibid.*, p. 82: "This rationalising system in explanation of the miracles reached its extreme pitch of development at the hands of the Heidelberg theologian Heinrich Eberhardt Paulus, in his 'Das Leben Jesu als Grundlage einer reinen Geschichte des Urchristentums' (1828). Of course—He Himself only died in appearance—the spear-thrust (recorded in John xix. 34) served the purpose of blood-letting and assisted his recovery."

order to know whether it were a place fit for a camp, as I came back, I saw many captives crucified, and remembered three of them as my former acquaintance. I was very sorry at this in my mind, and went with tears in my eyes to Titus and told him of them; so he immediately commanded them to be taken down, and to have the greatest care taken of them, in order to their recovery; yet two of them died under the physician's hands, while the third recovered."²⁸

With all the help of medical attention and nursing only one of the three was with difficulty dragged back from the jaws of death.

And we are asked to believe that Christ, after a twenty-four hours' fast (the last food He had taken was at the Supper in the upper room on the Thursday); after suffering pains which, it is acknowledged, had been such as to produce a death-like swoon so prolonged that none of those who laid His body in the grave discovered that life was still in it; after being left unattended, without nurses or doctors to dress His wounds, for thirty-six hours—was able, not only to rise, but to roll away the great stone at the door of the tomb, and then, with pierced hands *and feet*, was able to go about the garden and through the streets of Jerusalem, and that so actively that He could keep out of sight of all but a few and for a few short moments, and that, late in the day, still apparently without any food, could not only walk with the two disciples to Emmaus, who never noticed that He was lame, and that then, while they were lost in a reverie that prevented their noticing that He was going away, could

²⁸ *The Life of Flavius Josephus*, 75 (420), tr. Whiston, ed. D. S. Margoliouth (Routledge, 1906), p. 631.

run back to Jerusalem and arrive there and show Himself to Peter first and then to the others before they had time to hurry back with their message! Surely some probability may be demanded for explanations which are suggested to us as more credible than that given by all the evidence that we possess!

Not only is such an explanation physically impossible, but it is claimed that this bruised and broken man with difficulty struggling back to life gave the disciples the impression of one risen from the grave with a superhuman life, victorious in his own right over death. So Strauss saw when he combated the "lame issues" of Reimarus, Paulus, Venturini and Schleiermacher. He had to fall back on the theory that the whole story was a myth, a theory equally untenable as the next generation of New Testament critics proved, but not so absurd.

"It is impossible," he wrote, "that a being who had stolen half dead out of the sepulchre, who crept about weak and ill, wanting medical treatment, who required bandaging, strengthening, and indulgence, and who still, at last, yielded to his sufferings, would have given to the disciples the impression that he was a conqueror over death and the grave, the Prince of Life, an impression which lay at the bottom of their future ministry. Such a resuscitation could only have weakened the impression which he had made upon them in life and in death, at the most could only have given it an elegiac voice, but could by no possibility have changed their sorrow into enthusiasm, have elevated their reverence into worship."²⁹

²⁹ David Friederich Strauss, *A New Life of Jesus*, authorised translation (Williams and Norgate, 1865), vol. i., bk. i., p. 47, "The Resurrection of Jesus not a

But we need not stop to answer, for the theory resolves itself into the theory of fraud which, we saw, has been almost universally given up, and a theory of fraud, not only on the part of the whole body of disciples without a single exception, but of Christ Himself. For He must have allowed them to preach Him as risen when He had only revived.

And besides, there arises the question, "If He was not really dead, when did He die?" Not long ago this old theory was revived by Mr. George Moore, an eminent writer of fiction, in a book he called *The Brook Kerith*, which was hailed as giving a new and interesting theory of the Resurrection and even (though by a very young man) as "working havoc in the soul of many a dogmatic theologian."³⁰ The author, to make his story

Natural Revival," p. 412. He adds: "Such are the lame issues of Schleiermacher's *Life of Jesus*." Of Hase's *Manual*, the work which led him to write his *Life of Jesus* first in 1835, he says: "Hase forgets here his former judicious remark that a reviving invalid could hardly have appeared to the Apostles as a victor over death."

³⁰ It would be unkind to give the name of the writer of the book from which these words are taken, as he is probably wiser now.

Cp. Strauss, *op. cit.*, p. 18: "Looking from the commencement to the end of the life of Jesus, one could wish not to be obliged to say, to the prejudice of Herder, that all the monstrosities invented on this subject by Paulus, Venturini, Brenneke, etc., are no more than the consistently completed results of his suggestions. The Essenes in white garments to which Paulus reduces the angel apparition at the sepulchre," he says, is only carrying out more logically what Herder vaguely indicated.

plausible, had to drag in the Essenes, who are never mentioned in the New Testament and of whom we know nothing beyond what is told us about them by Josephus and Philo, and to invent a connexion with³¹ Christ for which there is neither evidence nor probability, and to describe Him as having been taken by them, a physical and mental wreck, to die finally in one of their settlements by the shore of the Dead Sea. What an extraordinary lack of moral judgment such fiction displays! Yet the book was widely read, and has been described as "exercising considerable influence over the minds of undergraduates who like reading."³²

V

The theory of visions. This is the theory that the disciples were honest but mistaken. For people have seen visions, or have believed that they have. Genuine appearances or hallucinations, whichever they may have been, have played a large part in the long course of the world's history. However explained, they have been not

³¹ This dragging in of the Essenes seems to have been first thought of by the Romantic writers of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, such as Bahrt and Venturini.

³² I have seen a reference to a still greater absurdity in K. Ingram's *The Church of To-morrow* (P. Allan, 1931), p. 95: "We have lately been offered, for example, the theory, advanced apparently in all seriousness by Dr. Eisler, that Christ had a twin brother whom the disciples met after Christ's death and were thus deceived into believing there had been a resurrection. Improbabilities like this suggest an almost desperate case."

infrequent, and it is argued that the Apostles' belief in the Resurrection was merely another of the many beliefs that have been associated with them.

This is a really serious argument and deserves to be treated with respect. There have undoubtedly been such phenomena. But it will be noticed by the student that such "visions" have certain general and well-defined characteristics. Let us see what some of them are.

(1) *Visions come to those who expect them.* So Spiritualists demand that at séances there must be present only those at least prepared to believe. Scoffers create a wrong atmosphere and destroy the chance of psychic manifestations. The majority of those present must be believers.

But the disciples did not expect Christ to rise. True, He had said things which afterwards they interpreted as referring to His Resurrection, but at the time he said them they were simply puzzled by them. Again, they were expecting the Messiah and were at least well on the way towards believing that He was the expected One, if they were not all actually convinced as St. Peter declared he was. But their idea of the Messiah was quite a different one. His coming in glory was imagined as the advent of a victorious earthly ruler. This idea was common in apocalyptic literature of the time. But there was no tradition that He, the Messiah, was to die and rise again.

(2) *Visions are a result rather than a cause.* In most, if not all, stories of visions they can be cut out without seriously dislocating the chain of events. Joan of Arc, no doubt, heard or believed she heard voices, and they played their part in nerving her to action. But if the sounds were merely subjective hallucinations, the story

of her courage and success does not suffer. She might equally well have led her people to victory without them. They either corroborated her desire or were produced by it, but in either case the cause was already there.

These causes can generally be traced. This is not the place to argue for or against the reality of the visions of the Virgin seen, or imagined, by Bernadette Soubirous at Lourdes in the year 1858. Nor is it relevant to say that our Lady could not have said, "I am the Immaculate Conception," when she meant "the Immaculately Conceived one." She would have spoken as the peasant girl understood her. Indeed, the girl herself, naturally, reported her words in the local dialect: "Que soy l'Immacule Conception."³³ But, whether true or mistaken, the vision was prepared for in her mind. Four years before the dogma of the Immaculate Conception of our Lord's Mother had been proclaimed as an article of faith by Pius IX. The subject had been discussed in the village and preached about in the church. The veneration of the Blessed Virgin had been there for centuries. The idea of pilgrimage was not new. There were stories of similar appearances elsewhere. The vision only localised the particular form of observance to be followed at Lourdes. It was perhaps a link in the chain but, in large part at least, was a result of what had gone before.

But the appearances of Christ were a cause, not (except perhaps in the case of St. Paul's conversion) a result. They changed the character of the Apostles. They marked the beginning of

³³ Cp. G. G. Dawson, *Healing Pagan and Christian* (S.P.C.K., 1935), p. 250.

the change. The most devout Roman Catholic believer in the visions of Lourdes recognises that they stand on quite a different footing.

(3) Visions are seen by one type of character, by men and women who are "psychic." The type is a well-defined one. Such men are certainly abnormal. Often they are unhealthy, unbalanced physically and mentally. Always, it would seem, highly strung and sensitive.³⁴

Possibly St. Mary Magdalene was a woman of this type. "The strong passion of one possessed," according to M. Renan, "gave to the world a resuscitated God."³⁵ But, as a matter of fact, this is pure invention. All we know is that, whatever the casting out of seven devils may mean, she was regarded as cured. She seems rather to have been somewhat matter-of-fact, and took Him for the gardener! And certainly she had come on a very practical and straightforward errand of attending to the last rites due to the Body of Christ.

But let that pass. Let her be regarded as a neurotic visionary. Still she was not the only witness. There was St. Peter, the rough, impetuous fisherman who had had to be rebuked for an over-officious protest. There was St. John, the impulsive enthusiast who wished to call down fire from heaven on the inhospitable Samaritan

³⁴ Cp. Von Hügel, *The Mystical Element of Religion*, vol. ii., p. 42; quoted L. Dewar, *Man and God* (S.P.C.K., 1934), p. 118: "The downright ecstasies, the hearers of voices, and seers of visions, wherever we have been able to trace their temperamental and neural condition and history, possessed and developed a definitely peculiar psycho-physical organisation."

³⁵ *Les Apôtres*, pp. 11 ff. The whole chapter should be read to see to what lengths sentimentalism can go in disregarding evidence and exact thought.

village. There was Thomas, the doubtful, materialistically minded disciple, who would only be convinced, he declared, by putting his finger into the print of the nails. There was Philip, the despondent, who did not think of expecting a miracle for the crowds who had followed Christ, and thought that two hundred pennyworth of bread would not be sufficient for every one even to take a little. There was St. James, the cynical "brother," who told Christ to go up to Jerusalem and show His works there, because, at that time, he did not believe on Him. There was St. Paul, the "fanatical Jew" or the "cultured Varsity man," whichever you like to consider him, and though his vision might be considered more of the ordinary type, he was certainly an eminently practical organiser. The Risen Christ was seen by all sorts of men.

(4) *Visions come at times of excitement.* Such possibly was the occasion of the Transfiguration, which approximates more closely to the higher type of psychic experience. But after the Crucifixion the disciples were uniformly depressed. "They have taken away my Lord and I know not where they have laid Him." "We trusted it should have been He that should have redeemed Israel." Their faces were "sad" as they walked. The disciples met with closed door "for fear of the Jews." The women asked who would roll away the stone for them.

(5) *Visions are generally of one type and "catching."* They generally, if repeated, begin at one centre and gradually spread, and then slowly die out. They are generally vague in outline. They are seldom seen by crowds, or even by more than one person at a time.

The appearances of Christ as described in the

Gospels are of a stubbornly original character. They involve matter-of-fact details. He gives definite commands about practical matters in the immediate future and of the later government of the Church in future days. They take place in broad daylight, in various places. He comes into the room. He walks by the roadside.³⁶ He meets them by the sea of Galilee. The picture of His risen body, material and at the same time above all the limitations of matter, is one unique and unparalleled in all the history of visions. Moreover, with the exception of the appearance to St. Paul as to "one born out of due time," they come suddenly to an end in connexion with a definite command and a promise to be continually present in a new way till the end of the world.³⁷

³⁶ Cp. F. Godet, *Lectures in Defence of the Christian Faith*, tr. W. H. Lyttelton (T. and T. Clark, 1883), p. 104: "What analogy is there between the artificial and contemplative lives of the saints in the convents of the Middle Ages and the perfectly natural, everyday way of living of the disciples at the time when they see these apparitions of Jesus? They are in the midst of ordinary practical life; they make their preparations for embalming the body; they are sitting at their meals; they are walking in the high roads and enter an inn; they are busy fishing."

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 78: "How are we to explain this sudden and abrupt cessation of such a phenomenon, if it were the result of a state of ecstasy? 'Psychology,' says M. Keim, 'would rather conclude that the action of that vibration, once set in motion by the Twelve in the whole body of the Church, would continue with increasing intensity, producing a life of enjoyment altogether ecstatic, than that it should have suddenly stopped, and given place to a life of healthy, practical, moral activity.'"

When people argue that the belief in the Resurrection was a "wish fulfilment," caused by a vision of Christ who, the disciples felt, could not die, in the early morning mists by the sea of Galilee, they are not merely exercising their imagination in the face of all the considerable evidence there is, but are exercising it in imagining a vision, or visions, which contradict all known characteristics of such phenomena.

Other theories may be mentioned. Some Christian theologians have argued that the appearances were not hallucinations, or visions of the ordinary type, but were "objective" visions. They were due, they say, to the real action of Christ sending an influence from the other world to reassure them of His continued existence and victory over death. They say they were messages, materialisations if you will, such as Spiritualists receive, or think they receive, from beings of another sphere.

But this is merely substituting a belief in a ghost for the belief in the Risen Christ. It is no easier to believe. It is less in harmony with the evidence. It is less consistent with the figure of Christ in the Gospels. It gives no sign of power different from that which any departed soul might possess. It brings no message of

Cp. W. Sanday, *Outlines of the Life of Christ* (T. and T. Clark, 1911), p. 182: "With this increasing weight of testimony, and increasing predisposition in the minds of the disciples, we should naturally expect that the appearance to the Five Hundred would contain within itself the germs of an indefinite series. We should not have been surprised if the whole body alike of Christians and of half-Christians had caught the contagion. But that is not the case."

victory over death. It is inadequate to account for the change in the Apostles. Keim, who advocated this view, described it as like a telegram from heaven. It adds difficulties and takes from the value of the thing done.

Another explanation we may add for the sake of completeness. Certain theologians have argued that the visions were subjective indeed, though were not created by the inner consciousness that saw them, but were due to the power of Christ willing that they should be seen. They accept the evidence of the disciples that they saw Christ walk and eat, that they heard His voice and received His words, but say that this was due to His divine power making them see all they thought they saw, that they saw it in the completeness and coherence with which we see things in real life, and that they all saw it alike.

The idea is not an easy one to grasp. And when we have grasped it we ask: "Is there any real difference between it and the natural interpretation of the record? Is there any real difference between God's altering the course of the world as we see it and His altering our sight so that the result is exactly the same?" Undoubtedly He could do either.

"Whether a change were wrought i' the shows o'
the world,
Whether a change came from our minds which see
Of shows o' the world so much and no more
Than God wills for His purpose . . .
. . . I know not; such was the effect."³⁸

Only this explanation is much harder to grasp.

³⁸ Browning, "A Death in the Desert," *Works* (Smith, Elder, 1890), vol. i., p. 590.

VI

Finally there remains the objection to all the non-Christian theories, namely: "What became of the body?"

All four Gospels witness to the fact of the empty tomb.³⁹ If the explanation is that the body was taken away by the disciples, that resolves itself into the theory of fraud—a theory, as we saw, almost universally given up. If it was taken by the Jews, why did they not produce it? They were only too anxious to suppress the rising movement. They tried threats and persecution without success. To have produced the body, or to have shown where

"He lies and moulders low,"⁴⁰

would have done all they wanted. Why didn't they do so? The obvious answer is that it was not there to produce.⁴¹

³⁹ Cp. D. F. Brundrit, *Is the Resurrection True?* (Allan, 1934). A work by a lawyer who examines the evidence and, though adopting the vision theory, decides that the evidence for the empty tomb is conclusive. Cp. J. P. Trevelyan, *The Life of Mrs. Humphry Ward* (Constable, 1923), p. 257: "I more and more believe that the whole Resurrection story, as a story, arose from the transference of the Body by the Romans—at Jewish bidding, no doubt, to a hidden sepulchre to avoid a local cult. The vacant grave seems to me historic fact."

⁴⁰ A. H. Clough, "Easter Day," *Poems* (Macmillan, 1892), p. 100.

⁴¹ Cp. W. K. Lowther Clarke, *New Testament Problems*, xii., "What Became of Our Lord's Body?" (S.P.C.K., 1929), p. 105: "They (the Sanhedrin)

VII

To conclude. The evidence is sufficient. That we showed in the previous chapter. The counter theories are many, but, even if they could be made plausible one by one, they contradict one another. They are often appealed to indiscriminately, but the man who was charged with a crime and produced several alibis, though he owned there was one he liked best, did not convince the judge of his innocence.⁴² When sorted

could have stopped the Apostles' preaching at once, if only they could have produced the dead body, or evidence of the corpse's having existed in a state of corruption before it became unrecognisable. There was no obvious means of disposing of a corpse—no swift, deep river, no vast furnaces or powerful chemicals such as are familiar to us in modern romances of crime and detection." And he quotes D. S. Cairns, *The Faith that Rebels*, p. 45: "What became of the body of Jesus? We are told that somehow it was lost. Is it then so easy for a human body to get lost at any time? How it could get lost in the tempest of love and hate of the Jerusalem of that day it passes the wit of man to determine. Was there no Antigone among all these women to stand by and remember the place of the body of the Lord? Is it likely that Mary was less loyal to her Son than the Greek maiden to her brother?"

⁴² E. A. Parry, *The Overbury Mystery* (Fisher Unwin, 1925), p. 179: "The one I like best—as Frank Lockwood said when he chose one of several alibis tendered by the prisoner's solicitor—is," etc.

Cp. G. M. Gwatkin, *The Knowledge of God*, vol. i., p. 62: "It is like a parcel of boys all making different and inconsistent excuses for the simple fact that they

up they will be found to come under one or other of the above six heads.

But it must be remembered that conviction does not come by argument alone, nor is it the strongest factor in belief. The difficulty of relying on argument is that, the more conclusive the proof is from the evidence, the more does the apologist seem "cocksure," and the more do men, in certain moods, distrust it because it seems so plain. We do not decide merely by evidence. For the right weighing of evidence, interest and a serious mind are needed. More than that—things must be put to the proof by action. For faith is an act of the whole man, body, mind and will. We believe by feeling, by experience, and not only by intellect and argument.

were all found in the wrong place." He says this of the one theory of design against those brought forward for necessity, but it applies to the Resurrection equally well.

CHAPTER IV

THE VIRGIN BIRTH

“ O beatus ortus ille virgo cum puerpera
Edidit nostram salutem feta Sancto Spiritu,
Et puer, redemptor orbis, os sacratum protulit,
Saeculorum saeculis.”

(Oh that birth for ever blessed when the Virgin,
full of grace,
By the Holy Ghost conceiving, bare the Saviour of
our race,
And the babe, the world's redeemer, first revealed
His sacred face,

Evermore and evermore.)

PRUDENTIUS.—*Cathemerinon*.

IN considering the question of the Virgin Birth of our Saviour the object of what follows is to show that it was part of the earliest belief of Christians; to consider the evidence for the miracle; to weigh the objections to the evidence for it; to examine the explanations of non-Christians as to how the belief, in their opinion, arose; and to suggest what may be the real reason why so many persons reject it.

For it is argued that, while it is true that it appears at the beginning of both the first and third Gospels, it is absent from that of St. Mark, or, as it is commonly put, St. Mark “knows nothing about it,” though his was the first to be written and was used by the other two. St. Mark's Gospel, we have it on good authority, was his account of what he had heard St. Peter preach.

He was his "interpreter."¹ It represents what St. Peter found useful or necessary in preaching in public, just as St. Paul preached on the Areopagus at Athens, or at Jerusalem, Antioch, and Rome. Now, for obvious reasons, the question of our Lord's birth would not have been a subject to be discussed on such occasions, especially so long as His Mother was still alive, and was, possibly, personally known to those listening. The main appeal was to the teaching that Christ gave, the signs that He had wrought, and, above all, as we see from the place it occupies, the events of His Passion.

"But," it is objected, "it is also omitted by St. John in the Fourth Gospel." Yes, and for exactly the opposite reason. St. John's Gospel was written later for people who had already been instructed, and to supplement, even sometimes to correct, the Synoptic Gospels which were already known to him, and probably to his hearers also. He puts right, for instance, the misunderstanding about the exact day of the Passover. He assumes his readers know who St. Mary and St. Martha are. It was written for Christians, or at any rate for people who were already interested in Christianity. It was composed as a book to be read rather than as a report of public preaching. It was not necessary to repeat what its readers knew already and did not deny. If there had been people who denied the Virgin Birth it might have been necessary to insist on it, but such do not seem to have been among the men for whom he wrote. But, for all that, it seems to be implied in his prologue,

¹ For this we have the authority of Papias, who lived c. A.D. 70-135. His words are given in *Question Time in Hyde Park* (S.P.C.K., 1924), p. 162.

which is a comment on his central theme, "the Word became flesh and dwelt among us." In the same way, he never mentions Baptism, or the Lord's Supper. They were already part of Christian life. But he gives comments on them in the story of the visit of Nicodemus and of the discourse after the feeding of the five thousand.²

Again, it is argued that "St. Paul knows nothing of the Virgin Birth." But we only know what St. Paul knew from what he happened to write about in the few letters of his which have survived. Besides, St. Paul knew St. Luke quite well. He was his companion for a long time in his travels, and was with him at Rome, and St. Luke is our chief authority for the story of our Lord's birth. St. Paul must have known it, and it is quite natural that, knowing it, he should have spoken of our Lord as he does when he says: "God sent forth his Son born of a woman."³

² Cp. C. Gore, *The Reconstruction of Belief* (Murray, new edition in one volume, revised 1930), bk. i., *Belief in God*, ch. xi. (iii.), "The Virgin Birth of Jesus," p. 275, note: "There is a reading of John i. 13, witnessed to by a number of fathers beginning from the second century—'who was born not of bloods (i.e., not of the mixture of human seeds) nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man (a husband), but of God'—which exactly describes our Lord's birth of a virgin, and not a few moderns, like Dean Inge, find it convincing. For myself I am disposed to prefer the reading of the MSS. But I have no doubt this common reading clearly presupposes the fact of the virgin birth. . . . Also, I think Dr. Chase (*Belief and Creed*, Macmillan, p. 67 ff.) has made quite evident that St. John's irony is apparent in vii. 42, and that the fact that Jesus was born at Bethlehem is in his mind."

³ Gal. iv. 4. Bp. Lightfoot, however, in his *Commentary*, *ad loc.*, quotes Job xiv. 1 and Matt. xi. 11,

I

Let us then examine more fully the evidence for this belief. We will begin at the end of the second century, when evidence of all kinds for early Christian history becomes full and ample, and work back.

Evidence about the year 200 is not only full but comes from districts spread over practically the whole of the Roman Empire, which constituted the Western civilised world. It comes from the South of France, which was in close communication, through Italy as well as by sea, with Asia Minor; from Africa, then a flourishing Latin-speaking part of the Emperor's dominions; and from Egypt, the corn-growing country which largely supplied Rome with food, and was also the link with the Far East.

In the South of France they spoke Greek, and Irenæus, who was a priest at the time of the persecution at Lyons and Vienne in the year 177 and afterwards Bishop of Lyons, wrote in Greek. As a young man he had been a pupil of Polycarp of Smyrna (A.D. 69-155), and of others who had been disciples of St. John. He also had been sent on an important mission to Rome. His books were written against the Gnostics, who, much as do Theosophists today, tried to combine

and says: "These passages show that the expression must not be taken as referring to the miraculous incarnation." But they do not show that it must *not*, only that it does not prove that St. Paul had it in his mind. Dr. Burney, in his *The Aramaic Origin of the Fourth Gospel*, p. 47, suggests that St. Paul's doctrine of the Second Adam is connected with the genealogy in St. Luke ending with "Adam, the son of God," and that St. Paul was acquainted with it.

elements of various religions. Such a writer would have to weigh his words. He declares that the belief in the Virgin Birth was universal, and his creed or rule of faith contains the clause saying that the Church receives "the birth of a virgin."⁴

Africa was Latin-speaking, and it was there that the first Latin version of the New Testament was made. The first great Latin-speaking Christian was the converted lawyer Tertullian. He tells us that not only there was in his days (c. A.D. 200) a definite Christian creed on which all churches agree, but he also tells us, its technical name was a *tessera*. Now things only get technical names when they have been established for some time. He quotes this creed four times. It includes the words "*ex virgine Maria*" (of the Virgin Mary)."⁵

Egypt saw the first great development of Christian education. Origen was the head of the Catechetical School there in the year 203. He was a writer of immense industry and we have an enormous mass of his output—commentaries, essays, philosophical works and controversial works, including a refutation of an attack on Christianity by a certain Celsus. Incidentally, he refers to a slander in the Talmud which declared that Jesus was a bastard son of Mary by a soldier named Panthera. In refuting it he assumes the miraculous birth of our Lord as part of ordinary Christian doctrine.⁶

⁴ *Contr. Hær.*, i. 10.

⁵ *De Præscr.*, 36.

⁶ *Contra Celsum*, I. ix. 1. Cp. J. Klausner, *Jesus of Nazareth* (Allen and Unwin, 1929), p. 23. The author, a learned Jew, writes: "The entire story of the birth of Jesus by a Roman soldier is only a legend owing its origin to the conviction of the Christians, from the time of Paul, that Jesus was

The belief, that is, is found held universally as soon as there is ample evidence to go by.

But earlier evidence is not wanting. Justin Martyr wrote his *Apology* or *Defence* of Christianity about the year 150 and his *Dialogue with Trypho* the Jew a little later. In the former he refers, if not definitely to creeds as fixed as does Tertullian, to creed-like passages. In four of these (the other two are very short) he includes in different words the belief in the Virgin Birth.⁷ Justin was born in Samaria, taught at Ephesus and was martyred at Rome.

Between the years 126 and 140 a certain Aristides wrote from Athens another of these *Apologies* or *Defences*. This, though mentioned by various writers, was lost till in the year 1878 a copy was discovered in the Armenian monastery near Venice. Since then a Syriac version has been found in the monastery on Mount Sinai, and part of the Greek original embedded in another work. It contains the words: "The Son of God Most High is confessed to have come down from heaven in the Holy Spirit for the salvation of mankind and to have been born of a holy virgin."⁸

Earlier still Ignatius of Antioch suffered martyrdom at Rome (A.D. 110-117). He was brought thither in chains overland through Asia Minor in the hope that he might serve as a warning to the Christians there. He took the opportunity of writing several letters to various churches as

born without a natural father." He gives a very full study of all the Jewish sources for the life of Jesus in the Talmud and other writings.

⁷ He also discusses the question more fully in his *Apology*, i. 33, and in his *Dialogue with Trypho*, the Jew, ch. xliii., 63-8.

⁸ Ch. xv. Cp. ch. ii.

he passed by, seven of which are extant and acknowledged to be genuine. Besides various passages which are like creeds in the forming, he speaks of "three mysteries which are to be cried aloud wrought in the silence of God," namely, the birth and death of Christ, and the virginity of His mother.⁹

We have further evidence which shows that the belief in Ignatius' time was no new one. For we know that the belief of Christians in the Virgin Birth was attacked by those outside. Cerinthus, for example, was the contemporary and opponent of St. John. It was said that the Evangelist, meeting him in the public baths, cried out, "Let us flee lest the bath fall in while Cerinthus, the enemy of the truth, is here." He taught, Irenæus tells us, that our Lord was born of Joseph and Mary like other men.¹⁰

Then there were the Ebionites of whom Irenæus also speaks. They were Jewish Christians, followers, some said, of a man called Ebion. Others, however, said that "ebion" simply meant "poor" in Hebrew, and that they were called Ebionites either because they were "a poor lot" or because they held a poor doctrine about Christ. They objected to the Church's use of the passage in Isaiah vii.: "Behold a virgin shall conceive and bear a son." They said the words simply meant "a young woman," and were so rendered in the version they used. In this they were right, but their objection shows that the belief of the Church was in the Virgin Birth.¹¹

⁹ *Ad. Ephes.*, xix.

¹⁰ *Contr. Hær.*, I. xxvi. 1.

¹¹ Cp. Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, bk. iii., ch. xxvii.: "But there were others whom that evil demon was unable to detach from their devotion to the Christ of God, yet found accessible from another

Then there was the Jewish slander referred to above. The actual date of the passage as it stands in the Talmud is later, but it is probably founded on a very early tradition. It is still often repeated. It shows that the Jews had heard of the story of the Virgin Birth. It has been suggested that the name Panthera is a mis-hearing, or a deliberate distortion, of the word *parthenos*, the Greek for a virgin.¹²

All this points to a primitive tradition. What is our first or rather second-hand evidence? For, as we saw, it was naturally not in the first public preaching, though it was from quite early times known inside the inner circle of Christians who might have heard of it at first-hand from the mother of our Lord Himself. We have two sources. The first and fullest is that in the third Gospel, which is called the *Gospel according to St. Luke*. Modern criticism supports the traditional ascription of the Gospel to him, but in any

direction and so made his own. Ebionites was a suitable name given to them from the first, since they held poor and low opinions about Christ."

¹² I have had the story hissed into my ear in the book market in Farringdon Street, and shouted at me (by a man the worse for liquor) near Victoria Station.

Cp. Sir William Ramsay, *Was Christ Born at Bethlehem?* (Hodder and Stoughton, 1898). I am indebted to this work and to Dr. G. H. Box's *The Virgin Birth of Jesus* (Pitman, 1916) for far more in this chapter than I can acknowledge. If I make any statements in it without giving my authority it is probably based on one or other of these two works. For a consideration of more recent works, see W. K. Lowther Clarke, *New Testament Problems* (S.P.C.K., 1929), "The Virgin Birth and Recent Discussion," pp. 1-17.

case the writer was a careful and accurate historian. From his opening words we see he claimed to have had special opportunities of "tracing all things accurately from the first," that he was careful about his facts as the basis of "certainty concerning the things wherein thou" (the "most excellent," or "his excellency, Theophilus.") "wast instructed," and he knew the importance of trustworthy evidence as delivered from those who "from the beginning were eye-witnesses and ministers of the word." Further, archæological research has proved how accurate he was in his knowledge of the circumstances of his times. It would seem that it was either from St. Mary herself or, perhaps, from her friends, that he got what he writes about in the first few chapters. He seems to have put it into his own words, since those used, for instance, in the Magnificat, the song, "My soul doth magnify the Lord," are of the same sort as those used by him elsewhere. Indeed we cannot imagine our Lord's mother at once extemporising an ode and remembering it word for word years after. She seems to have thought of Hannah and her song after the birth of Samuel, and, as she dwelt upon the wonders of the angels' message, put it into some such form which she told to her friends, or perhaps to St. Luke himself, when he visited Jerusalem in the year 57.¹³ It may have been Joanna, the wife of Chuza, Herod's steward, who had it from her and told St. Luke. He seems to have known her, for he mentions her name though he says

¹³ Dr. Box writes (*op. cit.*, p. 103): "In them we ought to see, as I venture to think, translations of hymns, originally composed in Hebrew for liturgical use in the early Palestinian Community of Hebrew Christians."

nothing more about her. But that would be quite natural if she was one of his authorities.

Anyhow, the whole is full of feminine and personal touches. We read how St. Mary was "greatly troubled at the saying," and wondered "what manner of salutation this might be," how she "pondered these things in her heart," how old Simeon warned her that a sword should pierce through her own soul, how Jesus advanced in wisdom and in stature and in favour with God and man—just what a mother would say.

As Professor Harnack writes:

"A story of the birth of our Lord, that had grown up freely in Gentile Christian soil about the year A.D. 50, or 80, or 100, would certainly have been of quite a different character from the story of the first Gospel";

and, speaking of St. Luke:

"his practice elsewhere as an historian proves that he could not have himself invented a fiction like this. Hence we may conclude that they (the stories) came to him claiming the authority of St. Mary, and therefore certainly from Palestine";

and in a note he adds:

"The circles whence they proceeded had a most profound veneration for St. Mary and placed her next her Son in a position of great importance. Such feelings do not arise of themselves; they must go back to the impression made by the personality of St. Mary herself."¹⁴

¹⁴ *The Date of the Acts and of the Synoptic Gospels*, tr. J. R. Wilkinson (Williams and Norgate, "Crown Theological Library," 1911), pp. 142, 154, 155. Secularist writers sometimes quote his earlier and less-considered opinion in his *Wesen des Christentums*

The account in the first Gospel, on the other hand, seems to come from St. Joseph. It is all told, it will be noticed, from his point of view. We hear nothing more of him after the boyhood of Jesus except from vague references like "whose father and mother we know." It is possible that he died before the Crucifixion. If that is so, that would explain why it was St. John who took the mother of Jesus to his own home. It has been suggested that the writer of the first Gospel used some document drawn up by Joseph to vindicate, should it be necessary, the honour of his wife. The Old Testament references may have been added by the Evangelist. Perhaps he used some collection of texts from the Scriptures made by early Jewish converts to support their claim that Jesus was the Messiah foretold by the prophets.

At any rate, both accounts show intimate knowledge not only of current history but also of Jewish life. The details of the temple, the high priest with his censer, the shepherds in the fields, the character of Herod fitting in with what Josephus tells us, the whole style of writing argue for their truth. The evidence is slight, no doubt, but that is from the nature of the case. There could only be two sources from which it could

(Leipzig, 1900), p. 20, that "we can be sure that the oldest tradition did not know the birth stories."

Cp. W. Sanday, in Hastings' *Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics*, vol. ii., p. 573, art. "Bible" (T. and T. Clark, 1909): "If we go, not by any external chronology, but by the quality and character of what was written, we should probably not be wrong if we were to say that the first two chapters of St. Luke are the oldest evangelical fragment or document of the New Testament. They are, in any case, the most archaic thing in the whole volume."

come, and from these, apparently, it does come. The whole story, as Dr. Box shows, is redolent of the soil of Palestine.¹⁵

II

But objections are raised to this evidence. "The genealogies in them are different, and both trace the descent of Jesus through Joseph. Clearly both writers believed that he was His father."

This, of course, was noticed long ago, and various reasons have been suggested for the difference. It has been supposed that one traces the descent of Joseph and the other of St. Mary, and that "the son of Heli" means "the son-in-law of Heli," a not very probable explanation. It has been suggested that Joseph's mother married twice and that "son" in one case means "stepson." Others have supposed that he was an adopted son with a natural father and a legal father, but there is no evidence for this, or that adoption was common, or even recognised, among the Jews.¹⁶ A more plausible explanation is that "son" means "heir to," and that one document, or both, may be based on merely legal claims. They are both obviously written to work out an

¹⁵ *Op. cit.*, p. 99: "Everything suggests that he (St. Luke) derived his narrative from a Hebrew-Christian source. Its Hebrew-Christian character, sobriety of tone, and general simplicity guarantee its essential genuineness." Cp. also pp. 105, 175, and 182.

¹⁶ Cp. Hastings' *Dictionary of the Bible*, art. "Adoption," vol. i., p. 41: "No such legal and complete transference of filial rights and duties seems to have existed in the law of Israel. The failure of heirs was provided for by the Levirate law."

idea, one to trace back the descent to Abraham, the father of the Jewish people, the other to Adam, the representative of the human race. They are clearly not exact, as that in St. Matthew is artificially arranged in three sets of fourteen, and sometimes skips a generation. Nothing in particular is based on them, and the question of their difference from one another is of little importance even if both were considered fictitious.

But the other objection is of more weight, namely, that they trace back our Lord's descent through Joseph. It is true that in the third Gospel the words "it is supposed" are added, but that, it is argued, is a later addition.

The objection is not so serious as it sounds. If the genealogies were drawn up originally for legal purposes they would naturally be traced through Joseph, as he was our Lord's father in the eyes of the law. But, quite clearly, the Evangelists did not regard them as implying that Joseph was his natural father, as they in one case immediately go on to say that he was *not*, and in the other put the descent at the end after describing in detail the story of the birth of Christ from a virgin.

Nor is it any objection to the truth of the story to say that it describes Jesus as born of the tribe of Levi and elsewhere claim that He was born of the House of David. Tribal divisions were not kept up so rigidly as to make this impossible. Anyhow we have independent witness that our Lord was considered to be of the Royal House. The historian Hegesippus (c. A.D. 150-190) tells us how the Emperor Domitian, hearing that kinsfolk of our Lord were still living who claimed to be descendants of David, made inquiries and, finding them to be small farmers whose hands

were hard with manual toil, dismissed them as of no danger to the State.¹⁷

"But," objectors say, "the stories disagree. They contradict one another. St. Paul knows nothing of a virgin birth. St. Matthew knows nothing of a previous residence in Nazareth, or of any continued stay at Bethlehem. St. Luke knows nothing of any flight into Egypt."

When anyone says or writes "knows nothing" that is always a danger signal. He generally means "says nothing," but saying nothing is not by any means the same thing as knowing nothing. Many people who know nothing say a great deal, and there are many things that we know about which we say nothing. Indeed, it is often best to say nothing, especially if the things you know are about other people. So, as we saw, even if St. Paul does not happen to mention the Virgin Birth (and we have seen that very possibly he did allude to it), that would not show that he "knew nothing about it." That is a very common mistake known as the "Argument from Silence."

So the writer of the first Gospel does not go out of his way to say that Joseph and St. Mary lived at Nazareth, though he seems to imply it when he specially tells how Jesus was born at Bethlehem. He says that the Holy Family fled into Egypt soon after the visit of the Wise Men, but does not say how long the three had been staying at Bethlehem, though it is implied that, since St. Luke tells us Herod ordered the massacre of the children from "two years old and under," they had been there some time. Again, St. Luke does not mention the flight into Egypt, but he does not say it did *not* take place. There are many other things that happened in the next

¹⁷ Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, bk. iii., ch. xviii., 20.

thirty years of which we are told nothing, but that does not mean that nothing at all happened. As the postscript to the Fourth Gospel says:

“there are also many other things which Jesus did, the which, if they should be written every one, I suppose that even the world itself would not contain the books that should be written.”

“But,” say the objectors again, “St. Luke makes a mistake about Cyrenius, or Quirinius to give him his Latin name. He was governor A.D. 6, after the annexation of the kingdom of Judæa by the Roman Emperor. There was, as Josephus tells us, a census then which caused a disturbance. Besides, we know who were the governors during the years 9-4 B.C., and Herod died in the year 4 B.C. There was no census earlier such as St. Luke describes.”

This is, no doubt, all true except the last sentence. But it is always dangerous to assert a negative, to say that “there was no” anything, when all we mean is that we “know nothing about” it. Now it is very improbable that St. Luke was badly mistaken. He knew the people concerned. He lived near the time. He was interested in his subject, and he was a careful and accurate writer. He had opportunities which we have not got.

And further, what he says is, “this was the *first* enrolment made.” That is the more accurate translation of the Greek as we have it in the Revised Version. It implies that there were others later, such as the one we know about in the year 6. Further, we know from papyri discovered at Oxyrhynchus in Egypt that there were periodic enrolments made every fourteen years. Fragments of their records have been preserved. Preparations might, therefore, well have been set

on foot fourteen years before, about 8 B.C., which might have been carried out in the way that would cause less friction among the Jews by everyone going to enroll himself "each in his own city," between the years 6-4 B.C.¹⁸

¹⁸ Cp. Grenfell and Hunt, *The Oxyrhynchus Papyri*, vol. ii., ccliv., p. 207 ff., quoted in G. H. Box's *The Virgin Birth*, pp. 53-4: "Professor Ramsay is on firm ground when he justifies, from the evidence of the Egyptian papyri, St. Luke's statement that Augustus started, in part at any rate of the Roman world, a series of periodic enrolments in the sense of numberings of the population; and since the census which is known to have taken place in Syria in A.D. 6-7 coincides with an enrolment year in Egypt, if we trace back the fourteen-year cycle one step beyond . . . it is *prima facie* a very probable hypothesis that the numbering described by St. Luke was consistent with the general census held in 10-9 B.C. Moreover the papyri are quite consistent with St. Luke's statement that this was the first enrolment."

Ibid., p. 64: "Sir William Ramsay, however, has been able to produce some new and important evidence which suggests that Quirinius was governing Syria in the years 10-7 B.C. This evidence is contained in an inscription found on the site of the ancient Antioch, in Asia Minor, which mentions Quirinius by name as duumvir: 'Quirinius was elected chief magistrate (duumvir) of the colony Antioch.' And p. 66: 'The enrolment must have been to some extent under his (Saturninus') charge (and so Tertullian is justified); but Quirinius was in military command, and household enrolments had to the Romans rather a military connexion' (and so St. Luke also is justified)."

P. 66: "Or it may be suggested that St. Luke, while right on the whole, has yet made a mistake as to the Governor's name. What may be safely dismissed is the view, which has been made quite

Again, Quirinius was no doubt Governor or duumvir in the year 6. There is an inscription preserved in the Lateran Museum at Rome which tells us about him. But it says that he was twice Governor of Syria—*bis*, for the second time. The first time was then probably in the year just after the death of Herod in 4 B.C. The actual lists may have been issued under his governorship from the figures collected during the two years before. Or possibly, though he was not yet in the strict sense Governor, he was, it would seem, in military command and “governor” in the eyes of the people who told St. Luke about it. There was a later tradition mentioned by Tertullian (*Adv. Mar.*, iv. 19) that the census was made under Saturninus. At most, St. Luke’s “mistake” lies in putting his holding office two years too early, while in all the rest he is surprisingly accurate. And which of us, I wonder, could be quite certain to a year or two who was Prime Minister fifty years ago in the year 1885.¹⁹

III

All the evidence there is goes to prove the miraculous birth of Christ. It is naturally not

untenable by the most recent discussion and research, that St. Luke’s statements as to the early enrolment, and its connexion with our Lord’s birth at Bethlehem in Herod’s reign, are entirely baseless; are indeed pure fiction, the product of a series of colossal historical blunders.”

For a full treatment of the subject, C. H. Turner in Hastings’ *Dictionary of the Bible* (T. and T. Clark, 1898), art. “Chronology of the New Testament,” vol. i., pp. 403-5.

¹⁹ For all this, see Sir William Ramsay’s *Was Christ Born at Bethlehem?* (Hodder and Stoughton, 1898).

much, but, when we come to consider the non-Christian explanations as to how it arose, it is immensely strengthened.

The first, perhaps the most commonly put forward, is that it arose from the desire to show fulfilment of Old Testament prophecy. We are all familiar, if only from their use in Handel's *Messiah*, with the words of Isaiah's prophecy, "Behold a Virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call His name Immanuel, God with us." The word in the Greek version, the Septuagint, which most of the first Christians used, was *parthenos*. "Hence," they say, the "origin of the legend."

But though that is the word in the Greek, the word in the original Hebrew is *almah*. It means just "a young woman," and in this particular passage refers to Isaiah's own wife. She was to bear him a son, and before he grew old enough to "refuse the evil and choose the good," in a very few years that is, Israel, as God was with her, was to be free from her enemies. In a later Greek translation the word is *neanis*, just "a young woman."

But what is more to the point is that there is no reason to believe that there was any expectation that the Messiah was to be born of a virgin. Jewish maidens longed to be married and bear children, hoping that one of them might prove to be the promised one. The passage could hardly have suggested the belief. Indeed it seems rather dragged in to illustrate the belief already held on other grounds. The interpretation was caused by the fact, not the fact invented to fulfil the interpretation of the prophecy.²⁰

²⁰ Even Schmiedel, in the *Encyclopedia Biblica* (col. 2,963), on whom secularist writers seem almost

"But," it is argued, "there are similar legends told about all the heroes and gods of antiquity like Dionysius, Isis, and the gods of Babylon." Or sometimes the question is asked: "Don't you know that exactly the same stories are told of Buddha, of Krishna, of Mexican gods and of a host of others?"

Let us take some of these most often quoted and examine them. Semele, it is said, was visited by Zeus and the result was the birth of a son of a virgin by a divine father, Dionysius or, to give the Latin name, Bacchus.

The Greek conception of their gods was quite anthropomorphic. They spoke of them as men with the virtues of men perhaps, but also with all their vices and passions. The stories they told of them were felt to be a scandal by all decent-minded men. Plato would not allow them to be told in his Republic. The story of Semele was one of these. It is very doubtful whether the Jews of our Lord's time knew these legends. If they did they would have regarded them with disgust and horror. They would not have dreamed of borrowing them or of imitating them. Still less would the Evangelists have based their narratives upon them.²¹ Moreover, they were

entirely to rely, writes: "Nor would Isaiah vii. 14 have been sufficient to account for the origin of such a doctrine unless the doctrine had commended itself on its own merits. The passage was adduced only as an after-thought, in confirmation." He adds that the origin of the idea of a virgin birth is to be sought in Gentile-Christian circles.

²¹ Lobstein, for example, recognises that "it would be rash to see direct imitations or positive influences in the analogies between the Biblical myth and legends of Greek or Eastern origin," so

entirely different in character and in detail. The best way to realise this is, perhaps, to read them in any standard Classical Dictionary, where the stories are told without any aim of assimilating them to the story of the Gospels. Here are the words, a little shortened, from Smith's *Classical Dictionary* (Art. "Dionysius," pp. 293-4).

"Dionysius was the son of Zeus and Semele. . . . She was persuaded by Hera, who appeared to her in disguise, to request the father of the gods to appear before her in the same glory and majesty in which he was accustomed to approach his own wife, Hera. Zeus unwillingly complied, and appeared to her in thunder and lightning. Semele, being seized by the flames, gave birth to a child. Zeus saved the child from the flames, sewed him up in his thigh and thus preserved him till he came to maturity. After the birth of Dionysius, Zeus in order to save his child changed him into a ram."

Does this bear any resemblance to what St. Luke tells us of the birth of Christ?

There are many nature myths telling us of the birth of various gods. They have been gathered together with great industry by Sir James Frazer in his many volumes of *The Golden Bough*. Many wonderful tales are told of the birth of these deities. Some possibly may have been born from

thinks that the idea of a virgin birth is to be so sought in Jewish circles, and especially in Isa. vii. 14. Cp. V. Taylor, *The Historical Evidence for the Virgin Birth* (Oxford, 1920), pp. 124, 127, where he argues, quite rightly, that you cannot prove the historic character of the Virgin Birth merely by "dwelling upon the incongruities and contradictions of alternative theories."

“virgins.” Anti-Christian writers even go so far as to say that at the beginning of the Christian era “everyone was familiar with the notion of virgin-born saviours.” Thus, for instance, Sir James Frazer (and his words are often quoted) says of Attis that “his birth is said to have been miraculous. His mother Nana was a virgin.”²²

The birth of Attis was certainly believed to have been miraculous. His mother conceived by putting a ripe almond or pomegranate into her bosom. The same story seems to have been told of Adonis, whose mother Myrrha was a myrrh tree. Is it conceivable that these and other less decent fancies could have in any way been in the mind of the writer of the Gospel according to St. Matthew?

About fifty or sixty years ago there was a tendency among students of Comparative Religion to find the origin and customs of all ancient religions in sun myths. This idea is now generally discredited by scholars but is still common in popular Rationalist attacks on Christianity. “There were twelve Apostles, and there were twelve signs of the Zodiac, that is suspicious. One of them was Virgo, the Virgin. Have we here the source of the belief in the Virgin Birth? Another was Gemini or the Twins, and St. James and St. John were brothers.” The fact that they do not seem to have been twins, that the twelve Apostles went about together while the signs of

²² *The Golden Bough, Adonis, Attis, and Osiris*, bk. ii., ch. i., p. 263: “His birth, like that of many other heroes, is said to have been miraculous. His mother Nana was a virgin, who conceived by putting a ripe almond or a pomegranate into her bosom.” According to another story, p. 269, he was the son of Nana and a monster called Agdectis. The unpleasant details cannot be printed here.

the Zodiac were separated from one another over the whole sky, and that the Blessed Virgin was not one of the twelve—all this is ignored. "The symbol of the sun was a circle with a cross in it like a hot-cross bun. Have we here the origin of the story of the Crucifixion?" I have actually had these questions put to me, and similar, if less obviously absurd, "parallels" are common in secularist publications.

But, apart from the fact that there is no reason to believe that the first Christians knew, or would have cared about, the signs of the Zodiac, quite obviously the detailed simple story of the birth and upbringing of Christ is not a sun myth. By picking out a few chance similarities and ignoring the far more striking contrasts, as the great anthropologist, E. B. Tylor, pointed out in his *Primitive Culture*, Cortez and Julius Cæsar can be resolved into sun myths. Nay, he himself showed how the nursery rhyme, *Sing a Song of Sixpence*, "wants but one thing to prove it a sun myth, that one thing being a proof by some argument more valid than analogy."²³

But perhaps a still stronger reason for rejecting these "explanations" than the fact that the similarities are few and the contrasts great in detail, is that the whole underlying conception of God is entirely different from that held by the Jews of Gospel times. As Dr. Matthews writes:

"The unique importance of the Christian idea of Incarnation is that it is an idea developed within the bounds of ethical Monotheism. This fact renders irrelevant the industrious collection of

²³ The interpretation of *Sing a Song of Sixpence* as a Solar Myth will be found in *Question Time in Hyde Park*, p. 139.

parallels in religions which have a totally different notion of the nature of Deity.”²⁴

Or people say: “Exactly the same stories are told about the birth of Buddha and of his early life.” Such people have probably got their ideas at second- or third-hand from Sir Edwin Arnold’s *Light of Asia*, a poetic account written with the story of the Gospels in his mind. In stories from pastoral countries it is not difficult to find allusions to shepherds. In any civilisation there are to be found “wise men.” Most countries in olden times had kings, and they were often jealous and cruel like Herod. Most teachers have disciples. Where there is any religion there are priests and, probably, temples, and some of these priests are sure to be old like Simeon.

But when you go to the originals of the stories the parallels collapse. There are thousands of stories about the incarnations of Buddha. One says that he was once born as a mouse and enclosed himself in a large crystal so that when an evil spirit in the form of a cat pounced on him it was killed. In the particular story of Sakya Muni, he was the son of a queen who had been many years married, and was not born in a manger

²⁴ *Studies in Christian Philosophy* (Macmillan, 1921), p. 54. Cp. W. Warde Fowler, *The Religious Experience of the Roman People*, the Gifford Lectures, 1909-10 (Macmillan, 1911), p. 469, note: “The plant (of Christianity), though grown in soil which had borne other crops, was wholly new in structure and vital principle. I say this deliberately, after spending many years on the study of the religion of the Romans, and making myself acquainted with the religions of other people. Any real assimilation of Christian and Pagan forms of worship was not possible till the latter were growing meaningless.”

but in a palace. Later legends say that he was born in a garden, that the Buddha entered his mother's side in the form of an elephant, that Maya (whose name, it is true, begins with an M but has no connexion whatever with the Jewish name Miriam or Mary) "rested calmly on a beautiful couch surrounded by a thousand female attendants," that the child "emerged from her womb sparkling with light," and "took seven steps leaving footmarks as bright as seven stars."²⁵

This does not seem to be a very close parallel to St. Luke's account of the Annunciation and the birth at Bethlehem. Indeed the great authority on Buddhism, Dr. T. W. Rhys Davids, though telling the story with a rather definitely anti-Christian bias so as to make it read like the Christian "parallel," wrote long ago:

²⁵ *A Life of Buddha by Asvaghosha Bodhisattva*, tr. from Sanskrit into Chinese by Dharmaraksha, A.D. 420, and from Chinese into English by S. Beal; *The Sacred Books of the East* (Oxford, 1883), vol. xix., pp. 1-3. Quoted more fully in *Question Time in Hyde Park*, p. 144. This is perhaps not the best example to quote. There are many others, but they are difficult to get at and to disentangle. A very full and careful study can be found in an article in the *Church Quarterly Review* for July, 1921, by Dr. F. Harold Smith, entitled *The Sutta and the Gospel: an Enquiry into the Relationship between the Accounts of the Super-Natural Births of Buddha and Christ*. He concludes, p. 323: "Inasmuch as, on close scrutiny, both the Buddhist and Christian doctrines appear so strikingly different as a whole, and a sufficient reason for each can be found in the religion of which it forms a part, we cannot resist the conclusion that attempts to prove direct borrowing are futile."

"I can find no evidence whatever of any actual and direct communication of any of these ideas from the East to the West. . . . Strikingly similar as they are at first sight, the slightest comparison is sufficient to show that they are rested throughout on a basis of doctrines fundamentally opposed."²⁶

No less confidently is it sometimes declared that there are parallels in India, and especially in the stories of the Saviour Krishna.²⁷ Among the many reincarnation stories of Hinduism you may find parallels to almost anything, but the story of Krishna is a bad choice. He was not born of a virgin but of a queen whose seven sons already born to her husband had all been killed by their uncle. (Herod was no near relation to the Holy Family.) He was therefore dressed as a girl and exchanged with a shepherd's daughter and so preserved alive. (This is hardly a parallel to the visit of the shepherds to Bethlehem and the flight into Egypt). Many very unedifying stories are told of him which need not be repeated. He had several hundred wives and his seven favourite ones were burned on the funeral pyre with his body.²⁸ I do not think this story shows any very

²⁶ *Lectures on the Origin and Growth of Religion, as illustrated in Some Points in the History of Buddha*, Hibbert Lectures, 1880-1, p. 157.

²⁷ Of course, when quoting stories of gods or heroes written in other languages, many words can be translated "Saviour," but even the word "soter" in Greek would mean something very different from the same word used by a Christian and associated with the name Jesus. To talk vaguely about "Saviour Gods" is misleading.

²⁸ *Bhāgavata Purāna ou Histoire Poétique de Krichna* traduit et publié par Eugène Burnouf (Paris, 1884), bk. i., ch. xv., xx., etc. The last verse of

marked resemblance to that of the birth of Christ and of His crucifixion.²⁹

Many other examples even more impossible to regard as the source of the belief in the Virgin Birth might be quoted. One writer in a book widely praised in the Press and considered by one of our leading scientists, a former president of the British Association, to be "excellently conceived and excellently executed," writes:

"An ambassador from heaven announced to the virgin Sochiquetzal, mother of Quetzalcoatl, that it was the will of God that she should conceive without connexion with man. Here we have an exact parallel to the annunciation of the Virgin Mary (St. Luke i. 26-35) in a part of the globe that was not discovered by Christians till nearly 1,500 years after the birth of Christ."³⁰

ch. lxvii., "Krichna épouse Huit Princesses" (Krishna marries eight princesses), is "Krichna eut encore des milliers d'autres épouses du même rang et non moins belles" (Krishna had thousands more wives of the same rank and no less beautiful)!

²⁹ These stories are excused on the ground that they are merely symbolical and that Krishna is not regarded as an historical person. But if so, he is still less a parallel to Christ who was "crucified under Pontius Pilate."

³⁰ The author gives no exact reference for his statement, so I am unable to judge how far the parallel can be described as "exact." But as the Mexicans were polytheists and worshipped "Centeotl the Earth Goddess, Tlaloc the Water God, Huitzilopochtli the War God, Mictllauteuctli the Lord of Hades, Totaniuh and Metztli the Sun and Moon," I do not think the exactitude can be very great. Cp. W. St. Clair Tisdall, *Comparative Religion* (Longmans, 1909), p. 26:

How such an "exact parallel" could have originated a story by St. Luke, who seems never to have been nearer to Mexico than Rome, 1,500 years before it was known in Europe, is not explained.

Many others might be added but it will be found, it is not too much to say, that the differences both in detail and in character are still more marked. There is very little sign in the Gospels of the working of the myth-making tendency such as later transformed the three wise men into three kings (which, as has been remarked, is a very different thing), or which ran riot in the apocryphal gospels of the second century.³¹ The Bible stories are full of simple matter-of-fact detail, all markedly Jewish. There is no sign of borrowing, nor is it probable that the writers would have borrowed from Pagan sources.

The enormous number of alleged parallels defeats the argument of those who bring them forward. They wipe one another out. The origin of the belief in the Virgin Birth has been attributed to Jewish prophecy, to unknown Jewish tradition, to Buddhism, to Babylonian origins, to Phrygian cults, to Persian beliefs, to later Mithraism, to Greek mythology, to unknown Eleusinian Mysteries, to spontaneous growth, to invention on the part of our Lord's parents or of the Evangelists, to the teaching of Philo, to

³¹ Cp. A. C. Headlam; *Jesus Christ in History and in Faith* (Murray, 1925), p. 171: "Many would doubt if the story of the Magi or of the massacre of the innocents was actually true. But the point is this: the belief in the Virgin Birth was older than these stories and it is a belief such as this which has caused the growth of the Midrashic element. If stories arose to illustrate or explain teaching, the teaching must have been older than the stories."

legends of the birth of Plato and Augustus, to German myths, to stories from Mexico, to traditions among various tribes in North and South America, etc.³² There is no trace of these influencing the minds of the early Church, nor can we imagine St. Luke, learned man as he was, collecting all these varied and mutually contradictory stories from all quarters of the globe, known and unknown, and then weaving them into one simple historical Jewish narrative, completely covering up all traces of his sources so that no one discovered them till the present day. A single cause is always far more satisfactory to thinkers if it will explain all the effects, and it is a far more reasonable explanation that the first Christians believed that Christ was born of a virgin because it was a fact.³³

³² References can be found in an article in *The Interpreter* for July, 1908. I need not repeat them here as the books they refer to are mostly dead or forgotten, though their ideas reappear again and again, and will probably continue to do so from time to time in anti-Christian propaganda.

³³ It is impossible to prove that in the whole mass of legend there is not one single real example of a virgin birth such as that described in the Gospels, but the following opinions of specially qualified scholars may be quoted as giving the substantial truth. L. M. Swete, *The Birth and Infancy of Jesus Christ* (Philadelphia, 1916), p. 118, quoted by G. H. Box, *The Virgin Birth of Jesus* (Pitman, 1919), p. 172: "After a laborious and occasionally wearisome study of the evidences offered and analogies urged he is 'convinced that heathenism knows nothing of virgin births. Supernatural births it has without number, but never from a virgin in the New Testament sense, and never without physical generation, except in a few isolated instances on the part of women who had not the slightest claim to be called virgins.' "

IV

The real reason for disbelief in the miraculous birth of Christ seems to be (1) that so many people start with an assumption that miracles cannot be. They begin *a priori* with a theory based on taking laws rightly assumed in studying the material order of things, and applying them to an entirely different order of spiritual things. They start with a fixed belief in what "must have happened," instead of approaching the question as a matter of history to find out what, as a matter of fact, did happen. Theories are useful to direct our studies, but they go down before facts both in Natural Science and in History.

And (2) in studying history they isolate events from their circumstances. Taken by itself the evidence for the Virgin Birth is insufficient. From the nature of the case it must be so. There are only two persons whose witness could be adduced.

But taken with the whole life of Christ it is enough. Someone once asked me: "If you heard a story today of a young woman having a child miraculously, would you believe it?" And I answered:

"No, I shouldn't if she was just an ordinary young woman. But if she were some one whose character I knew to be good I should say that there must be some explanation somewhere. If, then, I found that the child so born was different from all other men I should be more ready to believe it. If he turned out to be a man such as was

For a similar conclusion, St. Clair Tisdall, *Mythic Christs and the True* (Hunter and Longhurst), pp. 86-7.

Jesus of Nazareth, who Himself worked miracles and rose from the dead; if he turned out to be a man who claimed to be divine and supported his claim by his life and character; if I found my experience was shared by others through long ages and that men had found belief in him had met their deepest needs, why, then I should say that it was quite natural that he should be born in a way different from that of other men."

There are people, I know, who are sincerely convinced that Jesus of Nazareth was the Son of God Incarnate, who hold that He rose from the dead, who believe He founded the Church, who seek communion with Him in the Sacraments He instituted, but cannot conscientiously say that they believe the Creed, which declares He was "born of the Virgin Mary," in the sense in which it has always been taken. It is very difficult to say what they should do. And of course the Incarnation might have taken place by a birth from a human father and mother if God had so willed. But in the vast majority of cases (I, at least, believe) the reason why men do not believe in the Virgin Birth is because they do not believe in the Incarnation. Without that the evidence is not sufficient. With it it is enough. The real issue lies in the answer to the question: "What think ye of Christ?" But that is a question that must be answered elsewhere and, in the words of Tertullian: "Were it not that I now desire to moderate the bulkiness of my book, I would go at large into the proof of this also."³⁴

³⁴ *Apology*, 47.

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" Absente auxilio perquirimus undique frustra,
Sed nobis ingens indicis auxilium est."

(" Without a key we search and search in vain,
But a good index is a monstrous gain.")

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